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AN APPROACH TO POETRY

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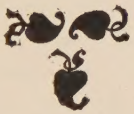
BY

PHOSPHOR MALLAM



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PREFACE

IT was an early discovery of the ancients that you cannot get blood from a stone. Modern teachers have discovered that it is equally difficult to get poetry from a pachyderm. If, however, the feeling for it be there, in the pupil as well as in the teacher, it may be brought out, clarified, and refined by judicious and sympathetic encouragement. The object of this little volume is to help as many young people as possible to an appreciation of what they already respond to, confusedly, in verse. Not, of course, that they will read the book for themselves: that would be to expect too much; but through the medium of such teachers as may find it convenient to have the subject set out before them, and systematically, yet not unsympathetically, treated, they may be influenced.

There are perhaps as many approaches to poetry as there are to morals. Each age has its ideals of both one and the other, and tries to put them into practice. The great thing in each case is to feel identified and affirmed in the ideal, for it thereby becomes true, if not the whole truth. And so if I have been too dogmatic in the following pages, I hope to be forgiven at any rate by those who are equally dogmatic from a similar sense of assurance. But should this prove an insufficient excuse, I can plead that my text in the main is simply an amplification of what poets in different ages have said about their art.

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AN APPROACH TO POETRY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

WHAT is a poet? Is he, as some take him to be, a preacher, a prophet, a divine healer; or, as others assert, a mere juggler of words, a witty jingler, a sick wailer? Does he give music only when he is struck, like a piano; or because he must, like a bird; or because he is inspired, like a Cumaean Sibyl? Are we to think of him as a rhythmic plodder carrying a burden of ideas along the common highway of feeling; or shall we speak of him in this way: a poet is something strange and apart, a favourite of the gods, who have bestowed on him extreme sensitiveness and sensibility, like open doors and windows, to subtle and delicate impressions that but bruise themselves against other men's walls; these he captures and coaxes to sing to him, and intoxicated by the beauty of their melodies builds for them a golden cage and feeds them on honey from the sweetest flowers in his garden; till they in their happiness become so musical, fancying themselves in Heaven, that Jove confers immortality upon them, and swinging in their golden cage they sing sweetly for ever, lifting up the hearts of men in every clime

and every generation? Or, again, is that only nonsense, and a proper description of a poet rather this: a man who beats out moral ideas on an anvil of verse?

> We live by Admiration, Hope, and Love;
> And, even as these are well and widely fixed,
> In dignity of being we ascend.
> But what is error? — 'Answer he who can!'
> The Sceptic somewhat haughtily exclaimed.

Is that poetry? Or shall we agree with Herrick that not every day is fit for a poet to write verse?

> 'Tis not every day that I
> Fitted am to prophesie;
> No, but when the Spirit fils
> The fantastic Pannicles
> Full of fier; then I write
> As the Godhead doth indite.

And yet Ruskin accepted Wordsworth's line— 'We live by Admiration, Hope, and Love' — as 'my literal guide in all education,' and rightly too, considering the meaning he read into the words. Surely therefore it must be good poetry. And for the same reason Ruskin's explanation of it must be better poetry. But what then becomes of the distinction between poetry and prose? Or is there no distinction? 'Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?' Is that prose or poetry? Or, again, was or was not Walt Whitman a poet?

We may find an answer to some of these questions in the different meanings attached to the word

poetry. And it will be well, before going any further, to consider some of these. Let us take the three main uses of the word, and start with the most common.

First of all, then, the term poetry is used as the converse of prose. Whatever is couched in the form of verse is poetry in this sense of the word, from a nursery rhyme to Samson Agonistes. But the Song of Songs, as we have it, is not. Bare form is made the criterion; matter and spirit and imagination and beauty count nothing. Consequently every one who writes verse straightway becomes a poet, like Dryden's Doeg, who

> was too warm on picking-work to dwell,
> But fagoted his notions as they fell,
> And, if they rhymed and rattled, all was well.

Walt Whitman, however, by this criterion is none. But since there is no special gift required in cutting up sentences into sections which shall jingle and scan, and since poetry in this sense of the word is merely another name for verse, we shall do better to try the second meaning of the word.

Poetry in the second place stands for poesy; that is, for all those formless and passive reactions of the soul to the infinite beauty, charm, or pathos of nature, life, and art. Every one is a poet now who shows any indication, articulate or otherwise, of feeling such reactions, though he may not be able to give them shape and to wed them to appropriate verse.

Gray, for instance, in this sense of the word calls his imaginary rustic a 'mute, inglorious Milton,'

thereby assuming that a man may be a Milton without having written verse like Milton's. Walt Whitman now is a poet; which he was not, judged by the canon of verse. In short, to quote Carlyle, 'We are all poets when we *read* a poem well.' To win such a title there is no more need to 'strictly meditate the thankless Muse'; no discipline of thought and passion and imagination, no harmony, no wedding of word and idea, are required; Pegasus can be bought at a bookstall for sixpence, and laurel wreaths are as cheap as sentimentality. Or say that a man has real feeling for beauty and can give it artistic expression in musical notes, in stone, paint, marble; if we want a general term for him, we can call him an artist; if a particular, we can call him a musician, a painter, an architect, etc. But if he cannot give expression to his feeling by means of verse, why should we call such a man a poet, or his work poetic? No doubt it is a compliment to poetry, but it is also a source of confusion, and leads to a wrong estimate of that art by emphasizing its matter at the expense of its form. For in poetry, as in every other art, matter and form must balance each other. Nor does anyone doubt the importance of form in the other arts, only in poetry and prose. And yet perhaps in these more than the other arts there is need to insist on the importance of form, because it is not so obvious, its medium being so familiar. And it may help us to a better notion of poetry if we go a little deeper into this subject of the relation between matter and form in the arts generally.

Every work of art, rounded and concrete as we

now have it, was once a more or less indefinite idea floating in the mind of the artist, to him far more glorious in that inchoate state, in all the glow of a fresh conception, untrammelled by any of the dulling limitations of body and felt in its immediate significance, than when irrevocably fixed and embodied in some form. And there never yet lived the artist — no, not even Shakespeare himself — whose execution was equal to his conception. That satisfaction is reserved for dunces. For to execute an idea is to re-present it under the conditions of some vehicle in accordance with the laws of the form chosen; and to give form is to assign limits and to arrange a sequence. And so in all execution the immediacy, the fluidity, and the perfection of the idea are necessarily lost. But something is gained as well as lost. Form has beauties and elegancies and powers of its own that give force, proportion, and harmony to the idea, which it lacked before. And even if this were not so, even if there were nothing but loss in execution, the artist would still try to give expression to his idea through some particular outward form. For that is his characteristic, without which he would not be an artist at all, but a dreamer. The artistic idea, being inextricably mingled with feeling, is not satisfied until it is expressed. It is true that all feeling asks for expression; but while other feelings and ideas are content with expression of any sort, as long as somehow they do get expressed, the artistic mixture of feeling and idea demands, and is restless until it gets, one particular kind of expression. The simple fact of expression contents the one, the particular and

exact form of expression it demands alone appeases the other. What form the idea demands in the first place depends upon the artist's original and inherited tendencies, not a whit on his position in life or his environment. Artistic feelings came to a ploughman like Burns, a barber's son like Turner, the son of a gamekeeper like Gluck, and they received expression through certain forms which alone could give them relief, namely, through poetry, painting, and music. And this particular channel of satisfaction once found is used more and more until it comes to receive the whole flow of the artist's feelings, except in those rare cases, such as Rossetti's, where more than one channel is found necessary for relief.

Leaving these generalities and coming to the particular art with which we are here concerned, a poet must necessarily express himself in words through the form of verse, for no other kind of expression can lull the emotional storm within him. The very difficulty of subduing his conception to form, the very process of welding together the outward and inward, the word and the spirit, 'fils the fantastic Pannicles Full of fier,' or, in other words, inflames his imagination and creates that divine heat that makes thought and feeling molten in the crucible of language. When they have undergone this process, form and matter are so interfused that it is impossible to consider them separately, or to change one word, without losing the charm of the whole. As an instance of the immense difference the slightest alteration of form may make we may compare a line from Romeo and Juliet with Theophilus Cibber's emendation of it in his adaption

of the play. As Romeo takes leave of Juliet for what, unknown to them both, was the last time, she, with a sudden premonition of evil, cries:

'O think'st thou we shall ever meet again?'

The son of the Dunciad hero gives this version of the line:

'But do'st thou think we e'er shall meet again?'

No alteration could well be slighter in appearance or heavier in effect; for it is enough to expose the fact that Cibber, as far as poetry was concerned, had no ear, no judgment, and no soul. That he had no ear is shown by his spoiling the rhythm of the line; that he had no judgment is shown by his failing to bring out the natural emphasis of the moving words; that he had no soul is shown by his substitution of 'But do'st thou think' and 'e'er' for 'O think'st thou' and 'ever,' whereby he loses the force of the one and the pathos of the other, and turns the passionate foreboding of the whole line into insipid stage rhetoric.

We cannot, then, be content with this second use of the word poetry, which takes no account of form, as the first use of the word took no account of matter. What we want is some notion which combines these two meanings, and we find this in the third use of the word. This makes poetry stand for the most suitable expression, in verse, of poetic ideas and feelings; and is the one we may provisionally adopt, taking it, not of course as a definition nor even as a good description, but as a ring within the circle of which poetry is somewhere to found — a ring which it is the object

of the following chapters to try and draw a little closer.

In order to do this we must deal with selection, expression, and arrangement — that is with the art of poetry, and with what is to be expressed, that is, with the nature of the poet shown through his thoughts and dreams; meaning by his nature, his feelings, thoughts, and spirit, whether given directly as in a lyric, or indirectly through dramatic or narrative poetry. No two poets express themselves in the same way any more than they have the same nature. But the art of expression works always under the same laws, and subject to the same vehicle. We must therefore consider words as the vehicle of poetry, and try and discover what governs their selection and arrangement in verse. When we have done this we shall be in a better position to consider the nature of a poet and what distinguishes him from other men and other artists. And having found these particular qualities we may go on to discuss them and eventually perhaps to arrive at some sort of notion of poetic perfection which may be of use in helping us to distinguish between genuine poetry and meretricious glitter. But if we cannot do so much as this, we may at least learn something of reverence for the poet and his art, something of awe for the clear spirit of beauty shining through his words, something of gratitude for the power that can so raise for us the value of life. It must not, however, be forgotten that the lover of poetry, like the poet, is born not made, and that no amount of culture can develop a seed that has never been sown. Intellectual appre-

ciation is a great thing, but, unless it is founded on emotional appreciation, it is a commander without an army. And if we would avoid rude shocks to our admiration of certain great men, we must bear this fact in mind when reading their criticisms on arts for which they had no bent. When, for instance, Dr. Johnson says of Lycidas, 'Surely no man could have fancied that he read it with pleasure, had he not known the author'; or when Carlyle says, 'Poetry, except in such cases as that of Keats, where the whole consists in a weak-eyed maudlin sensibility, and a certain vague random tunefulness of nature, is no separate faculty'; or when Ruskin tells us to, 'Cast Coleridge at once aside, as sickly and useless; and Shelley, as shallow and verbose'; we should remember in these and similar cases that the art of poetry is different from the art of prose, and that however great a man may be, it is yet possible for him to talk nonsense about an art for which he has no natural aptitude or special sympathy. Prose reduces the vague to the definite and orderly, and stays there. Poetry passes through the definite and orderly into the vague. It is the first merit of the one to be transparent, of the other to be opaque. We look through the Pactolus stream of prose at the golden grains of fact below it; but with regard to poetry we are content to

> Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
> And feed deep, deep, upon her peerless eyes.

CHAPTER II

WORDS AS SOUND — I

ALLITERATION, ASSONANCE AND RHYME

THE votary of poetry may be distinguished from the mere man of culture by the fact that he reads it with his ear and tongue as well as with his eyes and brain. Hear him quote his favourite passages or read them aloud. He lingers over the beautiful words like a lover over his mistress's name; the stately words come marching out of his mouth in solemn procession; the sweet words seem to melt on his tongue. And with what gusto he rolls out the thunder of the lines. He appears to taste poetry, like wine, with his very palate. And how it excites him! His voice takes a richer tone, his eye kindles, he becomes almost inspired. Sometimes even, like the First Player in *Hamlet*, he 'turns his colour and has tears in's eyes,' till some Polonius exclaims, 'Prithee, no more.' Nor, as Ion the rhapsode was, is he affected by one poet alone and left cold by others, but culls his flowers from many a garden, finding blooms, too, in neglected plots and adding them with delight to his nosegay. And if he is learning any new language we may be sure to find him working first at the poets, and mouthing the lines that please him, before he can well

understand them. Even while a schoolboy he did the same thing, and could repeat with pleasure, before he could construe, the old lines he has so often repeated since with a better understanding:

> Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi,
> Sylvestrem tenui Musam meditaris avena:
> Nos patriae fines et dulcia linquimus arva,
> Nos patriam fugimus: Tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra
> Formosam resonare doces Amaryllida sylvas.

To the unmusical intelligence it seems a mad thing to be able to get pleasure from the mere sound of words without a knowledge of their meaning. And yet it is certain that the pleasure many sane people get from these lines out of *Paradise Regained:*

> From Arachosia, from Candaor east,
> And Margiana to the Hyrcanian cliffs
> Of Caucasus, and dark Iberian dales;
> From Atrapatia and the neighbouring plains
> Of Adiabene, Media, and the south
> Of Susiana, to Balsara's haven —

is in no wise dependent on their knowledge of geography. And this pleasure in the mere sound of words is not confined to poetry. Who can forget Richard Feverel's discovery of the charm of ladies' names, or fail to share his appreciation of the sound of "Clare Doria Forey," of "Emmeline Clementina Matilda Laura Countess Blandish?" And even our coarser masculine names sometimes have music in them, as witness the name of that highwayman, which so enchanted Robert Louis Stevenson that he hailed it with laughing exaggeration as a poem in itself: Jerry Abershaw. Or, again, FitzGerald is

sure that "the sea" likes to be called θάλασσα better than the wretched word "sea."

And this love of beautiful sound for its own sake is one reason why poets are so fond of mythological allusion. For what a storehouse of lovely and lordly names has been bequeathed to the world by the Greeks and Romans, their gods and goddesses, Titans and heroes. The allusions, one fancies, would not have been so numerous had the nomenclature of the myths and legends been entrusted to, let us say, Dickens. But from whatever source they have been taken, classical, medieval, or modern, think what a loss it would be to literature if all the fine-sounding proper names were blotted out of it. In *Paradise Lost* alone they are

> Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks
> In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades
> High over-arched embower.

And yet they have no meaning; or, if they have, the pleasure they give is not dependent on it.

Onomatopoeia, or the echo of the sense by the sound of words, is a device occasionally employed by poets to get additional emphasis, as in the line from *Lycidas:*

> Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw.

But there is also a suggestiveness in pure verbal sound, apart from any definite meaning attached to the words. The possibilities of language in this direction have been explored deeply by E. A. Poe. There is hardly one of his poems in which the reader does not feel some emanation from syllables which,

in themselves, and for themselves, have no more meaning than the rattle of a stick along railings; and yet which, placed as they are in the poem, have a magic property equivalent to the Sesame of the Arabian Tale, and seem to open vistas of a wealth of significance. 'Ulalume' is an instance. How cunningly the name is led up to and prepared, and how mournfully it falls at last upon the ear; it is in itself a lamentation.

It is impossible to explain why one succession of consonant and vowel sounds should, without any reference to their meaning, give us extraordinary pleasure, and another succession should not, although it is obvious that the vocal organs pass from the utterance of one sound to another with varying degrees of ease. The childish tormentor who insists on our trying to repeat very quickly some such absurd and thorny collocation of syllables as, 'a thistle-sifter sifts thistles with a thistle sifter,' is but illustrating by the difficulty of the task the natural desire of the tongue for an easy slide. Moreover, as Stevenson showed in his essay on 'Some Technical Elements of Style,' there are certain consonants which seem to have a marked affinity for one another, so that the use of one unconsciously provokes the use of the others, and the ear, without knowing it, is grateful for their company. P, F, V and R, S, K are the most common sets — natural glides that beget a smoothness in speech. And the curious in such matters may find further instances in the essay. Alliteration, too, assonance and reverberation, each adds something to the pleasure of sound, as do

rhyme, metre, and rhythm. But when all the known items are reckoned in there still remains a large sum of delight for which we cannot account.

But though we cannot explain the full effect of sound on a sympathetic hearer, and though a large part of our enjoyment of poetry is due to the harmony between sound and meaning, it is true, nevertheless, that poetry is an art as well as an inspiration, and that much of the pleasure of sound is calculable. Like other pleasures it is based on two great facts of human nature. Men are so constituted that uniformity is agreeable to them, monotony hateful. The ear is gratified by repetition of sound, but a continuous reiteration of one note would in time drive any sensitive person mad; for the more delicate the ear, the more subtle is the mingling of uniformity and variety it demands for its satisfaction. And it is the same with the eye, and indeed with all our senses. The more refined they are, the more refinement they require in the means of pleasing them. Without uniformity there can be no law, and without law there could be no nature and no art. Symmetry, balance, proportion, measure, harmony are all expressions of the same need of a design or pattern or refrain in art, repetition with variety. We cease to get pleasure if the pattern becomes too pronounced or if variety eclipses the design. Monotony results from the first, incoherence from the second. In all poetry, therefore, repetition and contrast of some sort — of sound, sense, or beat — is essential to pleasure. In our poetry the repetition takes the form of alliteration, assonance, rhyme, metre, and

rhythm. And the art of using them all lies in feeding, without cloying, the appetite for pleasurable sounds. In this chapter I propose to deal shortly with alliteration, assonance, and rhyme, leaving metre and rhythm for the next.

By alliteration I mean the near repetition of the same consonant or vowel sound, whether it is repeated at the beginning or any other position in a word. By assonance I mean the echo or reverberation of a sound by other sounds similar but not identical. By rhyme I mean a mixture of alliteration and assonance occurring at the end of two lines which are close enough together for the ear to refer the one sound to the other.

Coarse alliteration is often caricatured by Shakespeare, as, for instance, in the *Midsummer Night's Dream:*

> Whereas with blade, with bloody blameful blade
> He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast.

Such 'hunting of the letter' naturally results in impalement on the horns of the prey. But here is another example — from *Kubla Khan* — where the alliteration, though strongly marked, has a very different purpose:

> Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
> Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
> Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
> And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.

This is an example of the way a poet can make sound help his imagery. The picture of smooth, slow-flowing, winding water is beautifully assisted by the strong alliteration of the liquid 'm' sound in the first

line: an alliteration repeated more gently in the third, and dying away in the fourth, as if carrying us with the river to the sea. It is perhaps worth noticing, too, that there seems to be in the English language a curious affinity between the open 'a' and 'o' sounds and their assonance, as shown in the preceding and the following quotations:

> Quothed Christabel, so let it be,
> And as the lady bade, did she.
> Her gentle limbs did she undress
> And lay down in her loveliness.

As regards alliteration, what is chiefly remarkable here is the unobtrusive appearance of the 'l' (at the end of Christabel and in the unimportant word 'let'), its gradual prominence ('lady' in the second line and 'gentle limbs' in the third) until it at last casts off all disguise and stands boldly forward to bear the weight of the line; a beautiful example of alliteration, rich without being sickly.

In the next example, from Tennyson, alliteration is carried to the extreme limits of satisfaction. A little more and the 'o' sound, as well as the repeated 'r's' and 'l's', would cloy the ear; but as it is the effect is one of great sweetness and tenderness:

> Row us out from Desenzano, to your Sirmione row!
> So they rowed, and there we landed — 'O venusta Sirmio!'
> There to me through all the groves of olives in the summer glow,
> There beneath the Roman ruin where the purple flowers grow,
> Came that 'Ave atque Vale' of the poet's hopeless woe,
> Tenderest of Roman poets nineteen hundred years ago,
> 'Frater, Ave atque Vale' — as we wandered to and fro
> Gazing at the Lydian laughter of the Garda Lake below
> Sweet Catullus's all-but-island, olive-silvery Sirmio.

The alliteration of the 'l's' in the last two lines is particularly noticeable. One could fancy that it is because they have been struck so hard in the first of these two lines that they have, as it were, sunk below the surface in the last.

The uses of alliteration are, then, first to gratify the ear by the repetition of the sound and lend a smoothness to the verse; secondly, to help mark the metre and rhythm; and thirdly, to give a kind of external unity to a passage, in the same way as a refrain does to a song, a refrain being but a form of alliteration. This may be seen in the fairies' song from *A Midsummer Night's Dream:*

You spotted snakes, with double tongues,
Thorny hedge-hogs, be not seen;
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong;
Come not near our fairy queen.
Philomel, with melody,
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby;
Never harm,
Nor spell, nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh;
So, good night, with lullaby.

Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legg'd spinners, hence!
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worms nor snail, do no offence.
Philomel, with melody, etc.

We see here the use of alliteration in binding together the parts of a song. It will be noticed, for instance, that the 'sp' sound runs through the whole (spotted, spell, spiders, spinners); that the 'sna'

sound in 'snakes' is repeated in the second verse — 'snails'; that the long 'e' sound is used all through (be, seen, green, sweet, weaving, beetles), and so on. The assonances in the refrain, too, may be noted (Phil, mel, lull, etc.), as also the double words 'hedgehogs' and 'long-legged' occurring in the same place in the same line of each verse. But it would be tedious to go on, though there are many other harmonies of sound in the beautiful verses which are not at first obvious.

A poet, of course, is as little likely to think of alliteration while he is composing, as he is to stop and count the syllables of his verses; nevertheless each word that he writes is influenced by the sound of those that precede it, and has its own effect upon those that follow. He weaves his pattern of sound as he goes along, not according to a preconceived scheme of alliteration and assonance, but adding word to word as it pleases his ear. But what pleases his ear is in fact alliteration and assonance, smoothness of sequence, and contrast, and the result is just as though he had worked according to pattern.

And now by way of foil to the sweetness and smoothness of alliteration and assonance, let us take some harmonies of a different kind. Milton uses alliteration sparingly; he gets his effects mainly by assonance, by consonant affinities, and the heavy swing of open vowel sounds. His words never trip, never plod, never slide. They have a stately gait. They walk like ambassadors of a high king, and are dignified in their lightest moments as well as in their wrath or exultation. Take the speech to the Philis-

tines of blind Samson, who stands, resting from toil, with his arms round the two pillars supporting the roof he is about to pull down upon the heads of his hearers:

Hitherto, Lords, what your commands imposed	(H,L,D,T,R)
I have performed, as reason was, obeying,	(R,D)
Not without wonder or delight beheld;	(H,L,D)
Now, of my own accord, such other trial	(R,D. T,R)
I mean to show you of my strength yet greater	(T,R)
As with amaze shall strike all who behold.	(T,R. H,L,D)

There is no word here peculiar to poetry; no word in itself particularly beautiful; no imagery, little inversion, the alliteration subdued, all quite plain, simple, and straightforward. And the oftener it is read, the grander it sounds, and the greater the art of it seems. Let us examine it a little. It is one sentence of six lines divided into two equal parts by sense, grammatical construction, and sound; the first, 'Hitherto . . . beheld,' the second, 'Now . . . behold'; and the art of it lies partly in the contrast, partly in the balance, between the two halves; but mainly in the way the ear is prepared for the crash of sound in the last line. The essence of the harmony will be found in the changes rung upon the three open vowel sounds —'o,' 'a,' and 'i,' and their assonances. The order of these sounds in the first three lines is 'o,' 'a,' 'i' (imposed, obeying, delight); in the first two lines of the last three we have 'o,' 'i,' and 'o,' 'a' (own, trial, show, greater); and in the final line are all three (amaze, strike, behold). It will be observed, too, how the last three lines, opening with the emphatic 'Now' and throwing a stress on the last

syllable of 'accord,' lead the ear to believe there is to be change of harmony, and holds it in suspense while the rhythm hurries us along to the last words of the next line ('yet greater'), which, being stressed by metre position and meaning, prepare the ear for the return of the old harmony. And thus apprised of what is coming, and momentarily balked, the ear is doubly pleased by the repetition of the long 'a,' 'i,' and 'o' sounds in the last line. We may easily test this, by substituting in the last line 'fill' for 'strike,' 'regard' for 'behold,' or 'alarm' for 'amaze,' when a perceptible disappointment will be felt in each case.

If we turn now to the consonants we shall find the lines hung on the groups H, L, D, and T, R, making the passage between one word and another smooth and fluent, and helping to bring out the full force of the open vowels. There is nothing exceptional in the use of these or other ordinary groups of consonants, for they are used in almost every easy-running passage, whether in verse or prose. The passage above quoted from *Paradise Regained* is a case in point, and so too is the following quotation from *Lycidas*. It is only that of all the consonants they are the ones which in combination are most, what old Puttenham would call, 'slipper on the tongue.' Even when used they may be so coarsely laid on as to revolt the ear by insistence, and so to negative the very effect they were meant to produce. But their proper business is to make a smooth carriage for the vowel sounds, and so they are always employed by Milton.

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
And with forced finger rude
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear
Compels me to disturb your season due;
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.

Merely as regards sound these are some of the most glorious lines in the language. And here again a great deal of our pleasure comes from the way the open vowel sounds are contrasted and harmonized, and from the delicate changes rung on the consonant groups. In the first two lines we have 'w' (once, brown, with) together with the liquids in a body; 'b' is introduced to prepare the way for the 'p's' to follow; and a couple of 'v's' let us know that we may expect their comrade 'f.' In the third line 'p' appears, and amid the liquids 'k' (come, crude) now becomes prominent. In the fourth line we have the 'f's' we were waiting for; the sibilants begin to stand out in the fifth and are conspicuous in the sixth and seventh; while in the eighth and ninth the chief places are occupied by the 'p's', thus winding up the W, V, F, P group which runs through the passage.

As for the other beauties of sound here, we might call attention to the assonances between 'more,' 'laur-els,' 'myr-tles,' 'ber-ries,' 'for-ced,' 'before,' 'dis-turb'; the reverberation of 'shatter' in 'bitter'; the grand 'ar' and 'oo' sounds in 'harsh and crude' coming so unexpectedly after the preceding flat vowel sounds in the line; and so on. But enough has been

said to show something of the technique of Milton's verse; more would perhaps be wearisome; so let us leave the letter and turn to the word.

According to Aristotle, 'beauty consists in magnitude and arrangement'; and although at first sight there seems to be no connection between beauty and size, a little consideration will convince us that — to use Johnson's comparison — no head carved on a cherry-stone can be so beautiful as may be a Colossus cut from a rock, and that, though there is no fixing any proportion between them, magnitude has some relation to beauty. It is at any rate certain that, with regard to words, the longer ones are as a rule more beautiful than the shorter. An obvious reason for this is that a long word allows more scope for alliteration, consonant affinities, and vowel sounds. It will be remarked, too, that the eye as well as the ear can take pleasure in long words; and also that the mere duration of sound, apart from its sweetness or sonority, gives a certain satisfaction. On the other hand, a monosyllable with an open vowel sound often gives more pleasure than a three- or four-syllabled word with flat vowels. Taken simply, words like 'foam,' 'eye,' 'blight,' please the ear better than words like 'insipid,' 'provocation,' 'expression,' although there is practically no word in the language that may not be made to sound well by combination with certain other words.

Poets therefore treat beautiful words like jewels, and give them a setting that shows them up to the best advantage, placing a long word or a line of long words among a group of short ones, or a sonorous

word in the middle of flat ones. There is, for instance, an oft-quoted line in *Macbeth*, which in itself is a magnificently sounding verse:

> The multitudinous seas incarnadine.

But give it its context and it sounds still more magnificent:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red.

Or in these examples from Herrick, that lover of sweet sound, it will be seen how the setting brings out the beauty of his long words:

> In sober mornings, doe not thou reherse
> The holy incantation of a verse.
>
> Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
> Then, then (me thinks) how sweetly flowes
> That liquefaction of her clothes.
>
> Rise; and put on your Foliage, and be seene
> To come forth, like the Spring-time, fresh and greene;
> And sweet as Flora.

As far as sound alone is concerned, then, words are beautiful which are long, have open vowels, have consonants 'slipper on the tongue,' and lastly are both in harmony and contrast with their companions. But it need hardly be said that poetry is never concerned with sound alone; every beautiful-sounding word has also a meaning which affects our total enjoyment of the word. For this meaning may be ugly, and so jar against the beauty of sound, thereby producing a

discord instead of a harmony. Or, again, the meaning may be beautiful or noble, in which case the whole effect of the word is intensified instead of being reduced. But I shall deal later on with the meaning of words, so that I need not here consider it further.

And now let us turn to the question of rhyme. To rhyme easily is a matter of vocabulary and ingenuity; to rhyme correctly is a matter of pains; to rhyme well is a matter of ear. Grammarians tell us that those rhymes alone are perfect which have their last, or sole, syllable accented and identical from the accented vowel to the end of the syllable, provided that such syllables begin with different consonants and have the same vowel sound; as, for instance, 'way' and 'day,' or 'song' and 'belong.' All other kinds of rhyme, they say, are more or less imperfect. And if poetry were the art of rhyming correctly, this definition would no doubt be useful, as would a standard rhyme like a standard weight or measure, to refer to as a test of correctness. But poets, being independent of rhyme, and using it as a means and not an end in itself, pay little heed to such definitions and find a rhyme perfect, not in proportion to its correctness, but in proportion to the sum of the pleasure it gives. To them a rhyme is something more than a correct correspondence of sound; it is a correspondence of sound between two words that help to pass a certain meaning and a certain emotion. And since, owing to the properties of our language, the number of words that rhyme correctly with another word, necessary for the poet's expression, is

often scant, rather than miss his material effect he will forgo the purely formal. But, more than this, a better formal effect is sometimes gained by an imperfect than by a perfect rhyme. The unexpected is occasionally more pleasant than the expected — within limits. Just as if a man were to shout at an echo a dozen times, 'Now,' 'now,' 'now,' it would be an agreeable relief from the monotony of the reply if the last answer were, 'Then.' In part, therefore, owing to the limitations of the language, partly because matter and feeling and pitch are of more importance than rhyme, sometimes also for the sake of variety, a poet uses eye-rhymes, assonances, and other so-called 'imperfect' rhymes in his verse. But where a perfect rhyme is available and fitting he will of course use it, not because it is 'perfect' but because it is the word that in the particular place gives the greatest sum of pleasure. Thus Shelley rhymes 'wert' with 'heart,' and 'spirit' with 'near it,' in the first verse of his poem *To a Skylark;* elsewhere he rhymes 'spirit' with 'turret.' Shakespeare in the *Sonnets* rhymes 'poverty' with 'injury,' 'thee' with 'melancholy,' 'counterfeit' with 'set,' 'live' with 'achieve,' etc. Milton in *L'Allegro* rhymes 'end' with 'fiend,' and 'verse' with 'pierce.' And numerous other examples of imperfect rhymes from the works of these and other poets might be added.

That our language is a difficult one to rhyme in, is due to many reasons which need not here be broached; but that it is difficult may be guessed from this one fact, that some of the most important monosyllables in it — life, truth, love, joy, time, death, God — have

remarkably few perfect rhymes to them; and many important dissyllables — such as beauty, sorrow, mortal, Heaven — are in a like case; indeed, our language is very poor in female rhymes, *i.e.* in rhymes between two syllables, the first accented, the second not, as between 'beauty' and 'duty.' And in relation to this defect it may be noted that the end of a line where the rhyme comes is the most conspicuous and weightiest position, as a rule, in the line; one therefore in which the weightiest and most important words naturally fall; so that the want of correct rhymes for the words given above often puts our poets to great shifts, notwithstanding the richness of the language in synonyms. There is this fact, too, to be taken into account, that of the perfect rhymes available to a word many are ruled out by their inappropriateness or their unpoetical associations. Thus 'time' rhymes perfectly with 'slime' and 'grime' and 'dime,' but of these words the two first are rarely fitting, and the last perhaps never. But, next to 'death,' 'love' is the most difficult word to rhyme with perfectly. 'Dove,' 'above,' 'shove,' 'glove' suggest themselves at once, but there are not many more, and the two last are rarely fit for use, though George Meredith manages to work in one of them in these lines from *The Woods of Westermain:*

> Love meet they who do not shove
> Cravings in the van of Love.

So that poets are mostly forced here to use eye-rhymes such as 'prove,' 'move,' 'rove,' 'grove,' etc. none of which are ear-rhymes to 'love.'

Rhyme, being so marked a consonance of sound at regular intervals, is likely to become tiresome to the ear, if the echo follows closely on the report, as in rhyming couplets. Such insistence of sound is generally relieved by poets, sometimes by the use of eye-rhyme and other imperfect rhymes, but more often — to use Milton's phrase — 'by the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another,' so that being, as it were, hurried over one of the rhymes, we hardly notice the consonance of sound. Where there is a grammatical and rhythmical as well as a metrical pause at the end of each line, as in so many couplets of Pope, most of the pleasure of rhyme goes, and with it much of the pleasure in the verses. We cannot get away from the constant 'smack, smack' of the couplets, which gives such point to an epigram, but is so monotonous in a poem. Compare in this respect these lines from *Il Penseroso:*

> Or let my lamp, at midnight hour,
> Be seen in some high lonely tower,
> Where I may oft outwatch the Bear,
> With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere
> The spirit of Plato, to unfold
> What worlds or what vast regions hold
> The immortal mind that hath forsook
> Her mansion in this fleshly nook,

with these from Pope's *Essay on Man:*

> Far as creation's ample range extends,
> The scale of sensual, mental power ascends;
> Mark how it mounts to man's imperial race,
> From the green myriads in the peopled grass;
> What modes of sight betwixt each wide extreme,
> The mole's dim curtain, and the lynx's beam:

Of smell, the headlong lioness between,
And hound sagacious on the tainted green;
Of hearing, from the life that fills the flood,
To that which warbles through the vernal wood.

But to realize what our language is capable of in the way of rhyme we must turn to Swinburne, that master of

Sweet articulate words
Sweetly divided apart.

Here is a verse from one of those rapturous outbursts of melody that go to make *Atalanta in Calydon* an imperishable fountain of music. By the side of each line I have placed a letter, which is repeated by the side of every line that rhymes to it. There are twenty-four lines and seven rhymes which are marked by the seven letters *a* to *g* inclusive:

What hadst thou to do being born,	(*a*)
Mother, when winds were at ease,	(*b*)
As a flower of the spring-time of corn,	(*a*)
A flower of the foam of the seas?	(*b*)
For bitter thou wast from thy birth,	(*c*)
Aphrodite, a mother of strife;	(*d*)
For before thee some rest was on earth,	(*c*)
A little respite from tears	(*e*)
A little pleasure of life;	(*d*)
For life was not then as thou art,	(*f*)
But as one that waxeth in years	(*e*)
Sweet-spoken, a fruitful wife;	(*d*)
Earth had no thorn, and desire	(*g*)
No sting, neither death any dart;	(*f*)
What hadst thou to do among these,	(*b*)
Thou, clothed with a burning fire,	(*g*)
Thou, girt with sorrow of heart,	(*f*)
Thou, sprung of the seed of the seas	(*b*)

As an ear from a seed of corn, (*a*)
As a brand plucked forth of a pyre, (*g*)
As a ray shed forth of the morn, (*a*)
For division of soul and disease, (*b*)
For a dart, and a sting, and a thorn? (*a*)
What ailed thee then to be born? (*a*)

The rhymes here are so deftly interwoven, the old with the new, that the poet is able to give his readers a double pleasure — the pleasure of recollecting an old friend in a charming new acquaintance. The ear does not forget the earlier rhymes, but the memory does, and the result is that the same rhyme is both old and new. And this repetition of rhymes is helped by that form of alliteration which is prominent here and consists in repeating the same words in different places through the lines, sometimes at the end of them to form the rhyme, sometimes not. Earth, dart, sting, thorn, flower, born, seas, seed, life, are each repeated twice; and all but three of them — sting, flower, seed — are used for rhymes. The result of the scheme of rhyme is that, in spite of there being only three lines out of the twenty-four that have no grammatical pause at the end, the ear, far from feeling any weight in the rhymes, is conscious of a sort of buoyancy in the verses, as if they were perpetually in the air, like gold balls manipulated by a skilful juggler.

This slight account of a few factors of beautiful sound might be extended considerably, without, however, helping to a fuller appreciation of beautiful verse. For, after all that can be said about alliteration, assonance, affinities, rhyme, rhythm, and

metre, the fact remains that it is something more than these that makes a poem beautiful. And it is that something more which attracts us, that something which lives in the whole, and is not to be found in any of the parts. We never in our own language read a poem in which the sound is separate from meaning, and we obviously cannot have the meaning without sound. And the beauty as well as the suggestiveness of a poem lies somehow in the correspondence between sound and meaning. Each gives something to the other, and their reciprocal influence is mingled in the whole. This, as I have said, will be considered in a later chapter. Here and in the following chapter I have tried to show that, as far as the sound of verse goes, there is but one judge — the ear. Those who have no ear for verse can never feel the full beauty of poetry; not can those whose ears are untrained distinguish between delicate and coarse appeals to the hearing. And to train the ear, an analysis of verse is often helpful. But analysis carried beyond a certain point suggests mechanism, not spontaneity; and, moreover, defeats its own end by becoming tiresome. I will therefore leave this part of the subject and turn to the consideration of metre and rhythm with reference to their effect upon the ear.

CHAPTER III

WORDS AS SOUND — II

METRE AND RHYTHM

WE have dealt so far with words considered, singly and in conjunction, as melodious and easily-gliding sounds. We have now to deal with words looked upon as mere units in a rhythmical and metrical scheme. And as rhythm is a wider term than metre, let us begin with that.

The essence of rhythm consists in a regular recurrence in time of certain units, the units thus becoming so many dividers of time in the same way as the rungs of a ladder are so many dividers of space. A unit of any sort, then a flow of time, another unit, a flow of time equal or proportionate to the last, and so on — that is the essential scheme of all kinds of rhythm. These units, being always something active, while the intervals of time between them are necessarily passive, give us the notion of stress or beat followed or preceded by a lapse. This lapse is, first of all, a lapse of time; but afterwards it becomes a lapse of the units that fill the time. And so rhythm becomes an indefinite prolongation of a series of stressed and lapsing units. It is only when we proceed to cut up the long ladder of rhythm into short lengths that we get metre. And here it is to be noticed that the

same rhythm may give us different kinds of metre according as to whether we cut into the rhythm at a rung, or between two rungs. In the one case we start with a lapse, in the other with a stress, and metre has different names for each case. But since the time-spaces are the same in both, the rhythm is necessarily the same. For instance, the time-spaces are the same in trochaic (– ∪) and iambic (∪ –) verse, and the same in dactylic (– ∪ ∪) and anapaestic (∪ ∪ –) but in each case the metres are different, giving us in these instances four kinds of metres but only two kinds of rhythm.

And so we have two things essential to rhythm in general — a time division and a recurrent stress. As regards verse, which is rhythmical scheme contained in so many measured divisions called metrical lines, the units of a stress and lapse are syllables, and the stress is marked by quantity, or by accent and emphasis. In English verse, with which we are here concerned, it is marked by accent, which is the natural stress on a syllable, or by emphasis, which is an artificial stress on a syllable laid either to mark the measure of the verse or to bring out the meaning of a word. Since the rhythm consists of divisions of time, and metre of divisions of rhythm, it is not in place, when considering whether a metrical line scans or not, to count the number of syllables in it. All we have to do is to ask ourselves if the syllables fit the time division of the metre, and trust to our ears, not to our fingers. For it is the value of stress lapse, not the number of syllables, that matters; just as in music it is the value, not the number, of notes and rests in a

bar, that brings them within the time scheme. In these two lines:

Hark! Hark!
The dogs do bark!

the time divisions are equal, though the first line has but two, the second four syllables. Or let us take (from Tennyson) a more elevated example:

Birds in the high Hall-garden,
When twilight was falling:
Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud,
They were crying and calling.

Reckoning by the numbers of syllables in each line, these verses are irregular; but the stress is regular enough, as may be seen more clearly when the accents are marked.

Bírds in the hígh Háll gárden, (4)
When twílight was fálling: (2)
Máud, Máud, Máud, Máud, (4)
They were crying and cálling. (2)

It may be remarked that the last line here would be as metrically correct and better grammatically without its first word (they). But it should also be noted that the inclusion of this same word improves the verse rhythmically. And this leads us to a further consideration.

The primary meaning of rhythm has been explained above. But rhythm has in English more meanings than one, just as the Greek word (*'ρυθμός*), from which it is derived, has. The word in Greek means first, measured motion, time, or rhythm, in the sense explained; next it means proportion or symmetry of

parts; and, finally, arrangement, order, method. Similarly our English word rhythm, besides the first meaning given, is used to express harmonious balance of sound. It is in this last sense of the word that we speak when we call a verse written in a certain metre unrhythmical. By so speaking we mean that the varieties allowed by the ear in every metrical scheme are not taken advantage of; that the metre in consequence is monotonous, the symmetry of the lines too exact, the balance of sound too even, and therefore the whole fails to please the ear. Let us compare, for instance, these two openings, the first from *Richard II*, the other from *Henry VI:*

> Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster,
> Hast thou, according to thy oath and band,
> Brought hither Henry Hereford, thy bold son,
> Here to make good the boisterous late appeal,
> Which then our leisure would not let us hear,
> Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?

> Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!
> Comets, importing change of time and states,
> Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
> And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
> That have consented unto Henry's death!
> King Henry the Fifth, too famous to live long!
> England ne'er lost a King of so much worth.

These two passages are in the same metre, namely, that kind of blank or unrhyming verse called heroic. But there is a great difference between them in rhythm. The difference is so marked that Coleridge thinks it impossible the second passage could have been written by Shakespeare. Certainly it is very

flat and leathery and heavy in its going, compared with those opening lines of *Richard II:* and it may be interesting to seek the reason for this. But, to do so, we must look a little into the structure of the verse.

English heroic verse without rhyme, generally called blank verse, is iambic in its foundation. An iambus is really a syllable short in quantity followed by one long in quantity. But in English verse it means an unaccented syllable followed by an accented, which syllables, however, are usually represented by the symbols of quantity (⏑ –). Five feet, each foot consisting of an iambus, is generally taken to be the norm of heroic blank verse; or in other words, if we drum our fingers upon a table five times at equal intervals, we can fit any heroic verse to the beat, as long as the second syllable of each line coincides with the first beat. Let us apply this to the first two lines of *Richard II:*

Old John | of Gaunt, | time-hon | oured Lan | caster,

Hast thou, | accor | ding to | thy oath | and band,

and the result is horrible, sound and sense being both destroyed: sense, because in the first line Shakespeare wishes to bring out the reverend age of the Duke of Lancaster and the King's respect for his uncle, and therefore the words 'old' and 'time-honoured' are emphatic: but this effect is entirely lost in the scansion given. In the second line the emphasis on 'thou' is misleading. Hast *thou* done so and so is quite a different question from, *Hast* thou

done so and so. Here there is no intention of comparing Lancaster with anyone else; the King merely wishes to know whether he has kept his 'oath and band' or not. The natural emphasis is therefore on 'hast' instead of 'thou.' And who but a schoolboy would stress the word 'to' in the same line? But the scansion not only is destructive of meaning, but puts an end at once to all charm of sound. For what charm can lie in a mechanical succession of alternately stressed syllables? The rigid monotony of it would break the heart of a clock.

But now let us scan the lines according to their sense and natural emphasis, and see what happens. They would then be marked something like this:

Old John of Gaunt, | time-honoured Lancaster,
Hast thou, | according to thy oath and band,
Brought hither Henry Hereford, | thy bold son,
Here to make good | the boisterous late appeal,
Which then our leisure | would not let us hear,
Against the Duke of Norfolk, | Thomas Mowbray?

The improvement is sound and sense is obvious. But what has become of our five iambic feet? There are few signs of them, except in the last line where there are five and a half. And if we are not satisfied with this one passage as a test let us turn to other passages in Shakespeare and Milton and look for our five iambi among them. We shall not find many; perhaps none, if we are unlucky. Suppose, though, we do find one or two; they are so lost among lines not

consisting of five iambi that it will seem ridiculous to call five iambi the normal line. It is, on the contrary, the abnormal line. On the other hand, the metre is invariably and recognizably iambic and not trochaic or dactylic, though both trochees and dactyls and many other kinds of feet are to be found in the lines. We shall never, for example, find among their blank verses a line fashioned on the dactylic metre of

– ⏑ ⏑ | – ⏑ ⏑ | – ⏑ ⏑ | –
Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,

or the trochaic metre of

– ⏑ | – | – ⏑ –
Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,

though we do find lines such as

⏑ ⏑ – ⏑ ⏑ – – ⏑ ⏑ –
In their triple degrees — regions to which.[1]

How, then, are we to reconcile a metre that is both acknowledged and felt to be iambic, with the fact that so few iambic feet are to be found in it? The explanation seems to be this: The iambic metre is a peculiarly heavy one in our language owing to the strongly marked accentuation of our words. Dissyllables like 'above,' 'beyond' are not so much a short syllable followed by a long as a trip followed by a fall. The classical proportion between – and ⏑ was 2 : 1, a long syllable being generally equivalent to two short ones. But even the Greeks and Romans made a distinction between the time length of long syllables; a spondee (– –) being worth more than (⏑ ⏑ ⏑ ⏑) or (– ⏑ ⏑). In our language the proportion between

[1] *Paradise Lost*, V, 750.

the syllables of an iambus varies from about 1 : 4 in words such as 'beyond,' 'above,' to about 1 : 1½ in words such as 'unjust,' the majority of dissyllables having the proportion of about 1 : 3, as, for instance, 'improve.' The consequence is that the iambic beat is so heavy that, once it is suggested, it takes possession of the ear; and no matter what kind of foot is offered it, or what variety of pause, it can — once the iambic swing is suggested — fit them all without effort into its system. Far, then, from emphasizing the iambic beat, our poets, after suggesting it, cover it up as much as they can without obliterating it, weaving in all kinds of feet in all kinds of ways: now dividing their lines into three feet, now into four; here dragging slowly over long spondees, there galloping hurriedly over the dactyls; emphasizing this word, slurring that; but always keeping the total time length of their lines the same, and always preserving the iambic cast of the verse. And when a line has two or three iambi in it they will probably be of different strengths, and the words will be so arranged as to meaning that grammatical pauses will break up the regular beat. And, besides this, the iambi will rarely be dissyllabic words that are complete iambi in themselves. They will, as a rule, be made of words that in themselves are trochees (– ⏑), preceded by a short monosyllable, with the effect that, though metrically the line (assuming it to be composed of five iambi) would run ⏑–|⏑–|⏑–|⏑–|⏑– it may sound like ⏑|–⏑|–⏑|–⏑|–⏑|– as, for example: 'With busy hammers closing rivets up' the rhythm, as was said before, being the same whether the line is read one

way or the other. Either way suggests the beat of the hammer and gives the same time-total.

Such lines as this are obvious enough in the marking of the accents. It is when we come to more complex lines that a great difficulty intrudes. That is due to the fact that perhaps no two people give exactly the same amount of stress to the various accents of words; so that, if we confine ourselves to long and short marks on syllables, our marking is pretty certain to be objected to by some one with an equally good ear, whose marking in its turn will very likely be found fault with by somebody else. How is a word like 'almost,' for instance, to be marked — ¯ ¯ ¯ ˘ ˘ ¯ ā lmōst, ā lmŏst, or ă lmōst? There is hardly a dissyllabic spondee (¯ ¯) in the language in which the proportion is exactly 2 : 2; the balance of accent almost always drops a little on one side or the other. And we have noticed how the proportions vary in the case of iambics. He, therefore, is a bold man who ventures to employ long and short signs in his markings. Nevertheless, the method has its advantages. It is clear to the eye, for one thing, and does not distract the attention from the verse. And it is simple and grasped without effort. Besides, after all, the object of marking a line is not to give minute values of stress (which indeed are arbitrary), but to indicate broadly the balance and swing of the verse. In reading the following passage, then, from the prologue to the fourth act of *King Henry V*, it must be understood that the long and short marks do not represent any fixed proportion to one another,

but that the ratio may, and often does, vary very considerably. They only mean that the relative stress is somewhat greater on syllables marked long than on those marked short; or else that the long syllables are more important as regards the meaning of the line and therefore to be dwelt on longer than the short syllables, which are to be more lightly passed over.

Now entertain conjecture of a time,
When creeping murmur and the poring dark
Fills the wide vessels of the universe.
From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch:
Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's umbered face:
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
Piercing the night's dull ear, and from the tents
The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
With busy hammers closing rivets up,
Give dreadful note of preparation.

A short consideration of this passage will, I think, convince anyone that Coleridge had excellent reasons for saying that 'in all our poets before Dryden, in order to make harmonious verse in the reading, it is absolutely necessary that the meaning should be

understood; — when the meaning is once seen, then the harmony is perfect. Whereas in Pope and in most of the writers who followed in his school, it is the mechanical metre which determines the sense.' This remark was made with special reference to the dramatists, but it is also true of the other poets. It is the meaning, the natural emphasis and the natural pause, that gives the rhythm of their metrical lines of blank verse, and divides each one into varying feet that split it into different lengths, which still, however, give the total impression of an iambic line of the same length, whatever be the number of syllables. For sometimes a line, particularly in the dramatic poets, is seemingly short of the proper time-total, as this from *King Lear:*

> Blow winds and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

where, in fact, the natural pauses on the two last words swell the line to the normal limits. Or, on the contrary, the line may be seemingly too long, as this from the same play:

> —— I will do such things, —
> What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth;

where the poor old King in the beginning of the line fumbles for a moment in his impotency, and then, recovering himself, brings out his threat as quickly as he can, this natural acceleration of speech keeping the line within the ordinary time-total.

But the rhythm of a blank verse passage depends on other things besides the variety in feet which the metre allows. Each line of the verse has a sort of

hinge in it upon which it turns, thus dividing the line into two pieces, the one balanced against the other, as in these two lines:

> Brought forth the tender grass, | whose verdure clad
> Her universal face | with pleasant green.

This hinge may come practically anywhere in a line, but is rare at the beginning or end; when it comes there the hinge is almost invariably strengthened by a grammatical pause at the same syllable. Here, then, is still another instrument, offering scope for rhythmical variety to a delicate ear. If we add to this opportunity of fresh balance in each line the wider opportunity for variety of balance in management of the meaning and grammatical construction of the sentences that make up the verse, we shall begin to understand why we can read a thousand lines of *Paradise Lost* straight off without our ears being offended at so long a continuation of one metre. The metre is the same all through, but the rhythm is inexhaustible. Sentences of diverse lengths, now emphasizing, now thwarting the flow of the metre, sometimes ending with the end of the line and giving so a double pause, sometimes carrying us over and so almost depriving the end of the line of its natural pause; the hinges of the lines in varying places; the quickening or retarding of the feet by the natural feeling and meaning of the lines; the changes in the feet themselves: all this gives occasion for infinite variety; and by their management of these occasions we are able to distinguish one poet from another, and a poet from a mere versifier. With this in our minds

let us compare once more the passages given above from *Richard II* and *Henry VI:*

> Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster,
> Hast thou, according to thy oath and band,
> Brought hither Henry Hereford, thy bold son,
> Here to make good the boisterous late appeal,
> Which then our leisure would not let us hear,
> Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?
>
> Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!
> Comets, importing change of time and states,
> Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
> And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
> That have consented unto Henry's death!
> King Henry the Fifth, too famous to live long!
> England ne'er lost a king of so much worth.

It will be noticed that the lines from *Richard II* form but one complete sentence with no greater pause than a comma at the end of any line except the last. In the seven lines from *Henry VI* there are four complete sentences, the end of each coinciding with the end of a line, giving us four lines in which there is a heavy pause at the end. Now, when the metrical pause at the end of a line is forced by a pause in the sense, the result is that the line is cut off from any dependence on its neighbours and has to stand entirely on its own merits; and the more marked the pause in sense, the more the line seems isolated, and the more risk there is, therefore, of the ear being offended with a monotonous beat when two or three such lines come together. To avoid the risk of this — or rather by the dictation of their sense of harmony — poets give such lines as much rhythmical

variety as they can. Accordingly it may be seen how in the first passage although each line but the last ends with a comma, the first three lines are balanced in sound and meaning against the last three. Also how each particular line is differently hinged; and above all, how the variety of feet veils the iambic beat of the lines, except in the last, when it stands out prominently but is relieved by the extra half foot. If in these respects we contrast the passage with the one from *Henry VI* we shall find in the latter an entire absence of balance, a want of variety in the hinge of each line, and an unmusical monotony of beat in the last four; and I think we shall be right in concluding that it was quite impossible for Shakespeare, at any time in his life, to have written:

> And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
> That have consented unto Henry's death!
> King Henry the Fifth, too famous to live long!
> England ne'er lost a man of so much worth.

It is not my aim here to go into the technical intricacies of versification. Prosody is a very interesting subject, and so is metaphysics, but they have about equally little to do with poetry. What has been said shows, I think, clearly enough that if we wish to draw as much music as possible from good blank verse we must not begin by labelling it as a measure of five iambic feet. For if we do we shall find ourselves in the act of wrenching the meaning and distorting the verse of the poet, so wedded in good poetry are measures and sense. And this applies to all kinds of metre. The obtrusion of its naked mechanism is at once fatal to its charm. The

ear quickly detects the metre of any passage, and delights in an art that can play enchanting variations on a simple theme, just as the eye takes delight in an artistically variegated pattern, like the pillars of the Beautiful Gate in Raphael's cartoon, but gladly escapes from a row of iron railings.

"We then," says Eckermann in his *Conversations of Goethe*, "talked of rhythm in general and came to the conclusion that no certain rules can be laid down for such matters." "The measure," said Goethe, "flows as it were unconsciously from the mood of the poet. If he thought about it while writing the poems he would go mad, and produce nothing of value." Not only does the measure flow from the mood of the poet, but it helps in an extraordinary way to reproduce something of that mood in the reader. When the metre is fixed beforehand, as in epic poetry and the drama, its form can obviously have little to do with the poet's mood; it was lyrical poetry Goethe had in his mind. But in that the metrical form has some felt, though ineffable, relation both to the poet's mood and our own. What subtle influence was it that made Collins in his lovely *Ode to Evening* express his thoughts in that peculiar kind of blank verse which gives such a strange melancholy charm to the *Ode*?

For when thy folding-star arising shows]
His paly circlet, at his warning lamp
The fragrant Hours, and Elves
Who slept in buds the day,
And many a Nymph who wreaths her brows with sedge,
And sheds the fresh'ning dew, and, lovelier still,
The pensive Pleasures sweet,
Prepare thy shadowy car.

Had he put this into rhyme the charm had gone. And it is the same with Blake's *Book of Thel*, the long blank verse of which has a mystic beauty that no other form could quite reproduce. For his thoughts and feelings flowed spontaneously into one particular form; alter that form, and the spontaneity and freshness of feeling are gone. As the shape of a glass vessel, blown from a tube, is dependent on the blower's breath, so the shape of a lyric is dependent on a poet's mood. His passion, his joy, his melancholy, his pleasure and pain, stamp themselves on it. If they do not, if the form gives no reflection of the mood, he is no poet, but a versifier, a mason not an architect. A poet does not go to form for inspiration, but to inspiration for form. Otherwise he would not be a creator but a mechanic. We can all fit words to a given measure; only the poets can fit an appropriate measure to an idea. See how in our great lyric poet Swinburne the feeling seems to demand the measure that expresses it; how in his *Atalanta*, for instance, after the Chief Huntsman, holding his dogs in leash, has opened with a speech in blank verse, those same dogs seem to be slipped in the chorus that follows:

> When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
> The mother of months in meadow or plain
> Fills the shadows and windy places
> With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;
> And the brown bright nightingale amorous
> Is half assuaged for Itylus,
> For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
> The tongueless vigil, and all the pain.

We are gripped and borne off on the joy of the measure, as we are made pensive by Collins' *Ode*,

and mystical by the *Book of Thel.* We feel how exactly appropriate each form is to the mood of the poet, simply because his mood is so worked into the form, that we cannot help feeling its reproduction in ourselves. In that lies the great value of rhythm and metre. They not only carry the poet's thoughts but rouse in us, as it were, a vibration of the particular emotion under which he wrote his poem; for by them, as by a divining rod, we have indications of the treasure below the surface. And they have other values. They give to beauty of language and weight of meaning a double power — the power of the horseman over the pedestrian. Mounted on them beauty has more force, and force more beauty. Their peculiar clenching effect, too, when combined with rhyme, in old saws such as:

Well begun
Is half done

serves in higher ranks of verse to make fast in our minds the messages of beauty and wisdom they bring.

As far, then, as the lover of poetry is concerned, all he will care about from the metrical point of view is that, whatever the metre chosen, it shall be varied, modulated, and disguised as much as possible without changing its essential structure; and from the rhythmical point of view that the rise and fall of sound shall be delicately prepared, easily swelling, and, like a wave, beautifully or grandly dissolving. And the total effect of the measure must help to reproduce in him something of the mood that chose

it. He will soon realize that the one way of feeling fully the roll and swing of metre and rhythm is to read poetry aloud, avoiding both the schoolboy's sing-song, and the opposite vice of a plain, flat, prosaic delivery. He will read out, and read slowly, as one loving the sound and music of the verse and following the steps of Apollo, not the plodding of a heavy-footed clown. His reward will be an insight into the harmonious properties of language and a deeper appreciation of the powers and uses of metre and rhythm.

CHAPTER IV

WORDS AS MEANING

HAVING dealt with the sound and swing of words, and having seen something of the technique of verse, we may leave the outward form of poetry, mastery over which is to some extent in the power of the artist, and approach its inner spirit, the gift of nature, over which the poet has less command. Before arriving at that important part of our subject, however, we have first to consider the inward nature of words, since we have hitherto confined ourselves entirely to their outward aspect. For it is obvious that words are something more than pretty counters: they are money, and possess value. Yet, like money, their value lies, not in their intrinsic worth, but in what they can buy. And the commodity which every one who spends words wishes to buy is, first of all, understanding.

Now in the ordinary intercourse of life all we want for our words is a general understanding. Our needs are simple and easily understood, and so is our language. Moreover, if we are at a loss for a word, we can eke out our meaning with a gesture. "I am hungry," "I am thirsty," need but a movement of the hand and jaws to be universally intelligible; other emotions may sometimes be signified even more simply and unerringly by a look. In such

cases we are communicating with those who know us, or, if with strangers, on familiar lines. But the difficulty of passing on a thought or an emotion increases with its complexity, and with the hearer's or reader's want of sympathy, intelligence, and knowledge. Those who do not know us or care for us, or appreciate our state of mind and feeling, have to be acted on by our words in such a way as to respond in the manner we wish. They are quite passive — we have to do all the work. For, in spite of Dr. Johnson, it is the business of those who would make a certain impression to provide both argument and an understanding of that argument. And the more complex and subtle the argument, the more difficult it is to express it so that it may be understood. When it is not an argument but an impression or idea caught in an uncommon mood, that has to be conveyed, the difficulty is enormously enhanced. At first we imagine we shall be able to conquer it by increasing our vocabulary; but we soon find that it is not enough to have the words, unless we have also the power of arranging them. Put in one way they will convey an idea perhaps of our meaning, but, in order to be understood thoroughly, more than a general idea must be given. Our tone of mind, the value we attach to the idea, our state of feeling with regard to it, are essentially a part of our meaning, and must also be given. And besides, a general idea is not the idea we were trying to pass. That was something particular, precise, unmistakably different from all other ideas.

"I have heard," said the poet Blake, "many people

say — "give me the ideas, it is no matter what words you put them into!" These people knew enough of artifice, but nothing of art. Ideas cannot be given but in their minutely appropriate words. Mark that expression "minutely appropriate." Appropriate words will give a general impression; to create the exact impression required, words must be not only appropriate but minutely appropriate to the idea. There is but one exact fit of words to an idea; change the words and the idea also is changed. Not the idea in the mind of him who uses the words, but the idea received by him who hears them. For if we grant that every word in the language has an individual significance, no two words, though similar, being identical in meaning, then it follows that any change, however slight, in the words of any sentence must produce a corresponding change of impression. But far more than this. Words gain or lose significance by their conjunction with other words, and the alteration of one word may destroy the clue to the whole; and words, besides their direct significance, have an indirect significance, association, which is often the more important of the two, and necessarily must be altered by the change.

It is because he knows all this that the poet is so careful in his choice of words. For what is the task before him? He has to create an atmosphere of right feeling in the reader who opens his book in a merely negative, or perhaps unconciliatory, frame of mind. He has to win a sympathetic understanding for his work and a clear perception of his ideas. He has to build up a lofty edifice of harmonious sound

in rhythmical and metrical lines of ever-varying balance, to develop his theme so as to preserve its proportions, to convey with minute fidelity the exact shade of his meaning, to keep the whole in key and pitch and make it fresh, beautiful, and significant; and he has to do all this with words, those shifty bricks with which he must work, never quite knowing their whole effect: words that have to be at once musical, metrical, rhythmical, significant, appropriate, and charming; words with their long trains of association and their delicate differences of meaning, the least ductile of artistic vehicles, facile to the uninitiated, a continual snare even to the adept. Every word, therefore, that a poet uses is a picked word, and if his meaning is not at first clear to us the assumption should be, not that he who spends his life in perfecting the carriage of his impression has imperfectly expressed himself, but that our knowledge, our delicacy of perception, or our power of apprehension, is imperfect. For we may have but a small vocabulary, we may know little about words, may never have studied any language, even our own, and may be unaware that certain words are continually shifting their meaning and association; or, again, we may be habitually careless of our expression, never weighing our epithets with a view to selecting the most fit, and may be without a feeling for rhythm or an ear for music or a mind for delicate distinctions; and how, then, can we pretend to be fit judges of a poet's words? Suppose, for instance, that the word 'buxom' only gives us an indefinite vision of plumpness, so that when we read in the

Canterbury Tales of the Merchant who says: 'For who can be so buxom as a wyf?' — we are inclined to laugh; is that the fault of the poet, or is it merely our ignorance? Had we known that the original meaning of 'buxom' was 'pliant,' and that its changes have run something like this — pliant, compliant, cheerfully compliant, cheerful, cheerfully comely, plump — had we known this, we should not have received a false impression. But even when we have capacity enough to extract the proper shades of meaning from words we may still be unable to grasp the exact meaning of a passage, and, being human, we are more likely to charge the poet's expression than our apprehension with the fault. In that case we shall accuse the poet of one of two different things; we shall accuse him of vagueness, or of obscurity. But if we would be just, we must distinguish between these two words, because vagueness is not necessarily a fault; it may, indeed, be a merit, when it results from intention and not accident. Obscurity, on the other hand, is always a defect, because it shows that the poet has not attained mastery over his implements. An image or idea is vague when its meaning is felt rather than apprehended. An image or idea is obscure when its meaning is neither felt nor apprehended. Vagueness is twilight, obscurity black night. As an instance of vagueness take these last six lines from Rossetti's sonnet called *Love's Testament:*

> O what from thee the grace, to me the prize,
> And what to Love the glory, — when the whole
> Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal

And weary water of the place of sighs,
And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul.

The picture here is dim, but its very dimness gives it a suggestiveness that a more definite outline might have lost.

But contrast with it the following verse from Browning's *Another Way of Love:*

And after, for pastime,
If June be refulgent
With flowers in completeness,
All petals, no prickles,
Delicious as trickles
Of wine poured at mass-time, —
And choose One indulgent
To redness and sweetness:
Or if, with experience of man and of spider,
June use my June-lightning, the strong insect-ridder,
And stop the fresh film-work, — why, June will consider.

There is nothing vague here — Browning is never vague — but he is sometimes obscure, though not as often as people make out, and he is obscure in this poem. His meaning was clear enough to himself when he wrote, but quickness of thought or the exigencies of rhyme seem to have forced him out of his path and here make him confused in his utterance. He has withheld the clue to the enigma, and leaves us puzzled instead of pleased.

Words, then, are symbols of meaning and of association. They have, that is, a defined and an undefined significance. In scientific or philosophical treatises the defined significance alone is of importance; but in literature the undefined significance,

the associations connected with the words, is of equal importance. In poetry, where the appeal is primarily to the emotions, the associations of words are of even more importance than their exact meaning; that is to say, that if a poet has a choice of two words, one of which expresses his meaning more exactly but has unpleasing associations connected with it, he will generally choose the one with the higher association and the less exact meaning. For it is hardly too much to say that nearly all poetry depends for its effect on the undefined significance of words. The associations of a word give it an atmosphere, without which it is a sharp outline with no background or shading to give it substance. What is sharply defined is for the understanding, and if poetry appealed only to the understanding it would be but a weakened form of prose. It would be rigid, colourless, and cold, and might be measured off the counter like so many yards of drab. But poetry, though passing through common sense, rises above it, and moves us more by the indefinite feelings it stirs than by the actual meaning it expresses. What is understood is — so far — at an end; there is no more to it; its freshness was its appeal; and that gone, our interest quickly goes too. But a good poem is an inexhaustible source of pleasure, because it rouses a thousand undefined and delicate associations in our mind which severally and collectively give us pleasure, not only in and for themselves, but also by throwing a glamour over the logical meaning of the words.

Let us look at words, then, from these two points of

view. And first as to the direct significance of words in poetry.

As said before, most of us are quite satisfied if our general meaning can be extracted from our words, for that is all we want. But a poet wants more than this. He searches for words which will put the essence of his thoughts before us in the most telling way, and accordingly selects those that, besides being rich in meaning, will also make his meaning ring. And in the course of his selection he first dismisses all hackneyed words and phrases, which by incessant repetition have lost vigour and flavour, and chooses those that will express his meaning with freshness. By this I do not of course mean newly-coined or antique words — there are quite enough words alive in the language to give freshness without doing that — but words that apply an old meaning in a new way. Here is an illustration from *The Ancient Mariner:*

> The silly buckets on the deck
> That had so long remained,
> I dreamt that they were filled with dew,
> And when I awoke, it rained.

The adjective 'silly' is usually applied to animate things, but how effective it is here! Remember all the fearful experiences the Mariner has been through — the storm, the apparitions, the death of his comrades, and the thirst that is still consuming him; and then imagine him staring at a row of empty buckets on the deck. There they stand, solid, unimaginative, vacuous, and tormenting by their suggestiveness of drink to a thirsty man. They

cannot feel, but they provoke feeling — lumpish things, which nevertheless have a look of stupid innocence and satisfied ignorance about them. No matter to them the horrors that have been, and still are, going on around them; they, at any rate, are out of them, and squat there stolid and empty. The silly buckets.

Or take this illustration from *Paradise Lost.* Satan being discovered in Paradise and brought to Gabriel is preparing to battle with him and his fellow-angels when the Eternal 'hung forth in Heaven his golden scales,' and the issue of the impending conflict is shown to be against Satan:

> The Fiend looked up, and knew
> His mounted scale aloft; nor more; but fled
> Murmuring.

If we substitute for 'murmuring' either 'muttering' or 'blaspheming' or 'reviling,' or any other three-syllabled word of a similar character, we shall perceive how inadequate it is to give that impression of inarticulate, impotent rage, hatred, revolt, and despair which we feel in the 'murmuring.' The nearest word to it in sense and sound is 'muttering'; but that would imply a feeling of rebellion put into actual words uttered in a low tone, and carries a threat of reprisals at some future date. There is no menace and no hope in the 'murmuring.'

From these two illustrations we may see that a poet uses words that will absorb as much as possible of his meaning, to be afterwards squeezed out by the careful reader. And the greater the poet the deeper and fuller the meaning of his words. But

when we read a passage, especially in our dramatic poets, the minute appropriateness of the language does not always strike us at once. There are so many words seemingly so carelessly used, and the general sense is so obvious and so interesting, that we let slip many finer shades which a further consideration reveals to us. This is particularly the case with Shakespeare, who, especially in his tragedies, seems to fling down his words like jewelled wine-cups that spill half their meaning with a chime. And yet when we look into them we find them brimful of significance.

> —— but when the planets
> In evil mixture to disorder wander,
> What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny,
> What ranging of the sea, shaking of earth,
> Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
> Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
> The unity and married calm of states
> Quite from their fixture!

In this passage from the first act of *Troilus and Cressida* I want to draw particular attention to the four verbs, 'Divert and crack, rend and deracinate.' Imagine an oak in the calm that precedes a storm, standing fixed and still. Then comes the first strong blast, and the tree is swayed, is 'diverted' from its upright position; a still stronger blast, and the branches are first 'cracked,' then 'rent' or torn off, and finally by the full fury of the tempest the oak is completely rooted out of the soil to which it was married; it is 'deracinated.' So that is this one line and with those four verbs the whole process of

destruction is forcibly and orderly shown. And in addition to this the sound of the words is made to suggest the meaning (note the recurrent 'r'), while their position enforces it (note the juxtaposition of 'crack' and 'rend'). They are not, therefore, just good-sounding words put down at haphazard, but are minutely appropriate to the idea to be conveyed.

[And here one is tempted to say a word or two upon a well-known crux in *Hamlet*, which occurs in the speech Hamlet makes while is he waiting for the ghost — the speech in which he deplores the drinking habits of the Danes. However noble men may be (he says in effect), still, if they have a fault, often they

> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault; the dram of eale
> Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
> To his own scandal.

The last clause is meaningless as it stands, and many emendations have been proposed, though I have seen none that offers a satisfactory solution. I do not know whether the idea has occurred to others — most likely it has — nor does it matter, but the true reading of the lines seems to me to be this:

> —— the dram of *esile*
> Doth all the noble substance of a *draught*
> To his own scandal.

'Esile' means vinegar, and is used later in the play. So that if the emendation be correct, Shakespeare says that just as a particular fault corrupts a general

virtue, so a little vinegar turns to its own bitterness the finest wine. This illustration drawn from drinking seems to be in point with the whole speech, and neatly to sum up the argument.]

With regard to the direct meaning, then, a poet makes his words as full, as vigorous, and as accurate as possible. But this by itself will not suffice to make them minutely appropriate to the idea, unless also their indirect significance, their associations, are in harmony with the idea. For most words, by being constantly used in connexion with certain facts or ideas, have in addition to their logical meaning the power of calling up the particular facts or ideas with which they are commonly associated. And besides their particular associations words may have a general association, as when they belong to a well-recognized class, such as a scientific, romantic, slang, or vulgar class, in which case they suggest the tone of mind or state of feeling common to the respective classes. We may call the animal we ride a horse, a steed, a nag, etc., or a Rozinante, a Bucephalus, etc., and the ideas or facts suggested by each term will be different, though the logical meaning of all is the same. Horse is a neutral word, its logical meaning exhausts it; steed is romantic and has romantic suggestions, and so on. The reason, therefore, why Keats in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* writes: 'I set her on my pacing steed,' and not 'I put her on my stepping nag' is partly because it has a better sound, and more exactly conveys his meaning, but mainly because the second phrase would clash with the romantic tone of the ballad. So that in his selection

of words a poet is greatly influenced by the particular and general associations they are likely to awaken, lest his verses should be spoilt by the intrusion of some incongruous idea or fact which a technical word may carry. For let us suppose that a feeling of solemnity has given a man certain ideas which he attempts to convey by means of certain words; then if the result on his hearers is (to take an extreme case) a hearty burst of laughter, it is clear that his words though perhaps appropriate enough in their logical meaning are by no means appropriate in their imaginative suggestions. In particular when a poet uses a metaphor drawn from ordinary life and applies it to his idea he tries to avoid reducing the idea to the metaphor, and rather seeks to raise the metaphor to the idea. He does not mention, or does not dwell on, or give prominence to, the prosaic accompaniments of fact, but chooses the essential word or words that are indicative of the metaphor, without recalling its technicalities, unless these happen to be of a kind which fit the elevation of his idea. By way of illustrating this, let us again draw a comparison from *Romeo and Juliet* and Cibber's adaptation of the play. The original lines are these:

> Eyes, look your last!
> Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, O you,
> The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
> A dateless bargain to engrossing death.

Amazingly altered by Cibber, thus:

> And now, eyes look your last,
> Arms take your last embrace, while on these lips
> I fix the seal of an eternal contract.

The bare idea at the back of these lines is the same, but 'contract,' 'fix the seal,' are more suggestive of a lawyer's office and clerkly writing on greasy parchment than the last kiss of passion on the lips of a dead girl-wife. And Cibber emphasizes the notion of a business transaction by ending on the word 'contract,' whereas Shakespeare ends on 'death,' which both by its position and because rhythm and alliteration throw stress on it, is the most commanding word in the sentence, as it is the weightiest factor in the idea. Both use one metaphor, but while Cibber brings out its prosaic accompaniments and so reduces the idea to the metaphor, Shakespeare merely suggests the metaphor in order to make a more vivid presentation of the idea. We may see this in another way. To seal with a kiss, and to fix a seal on the lips, may mean the same thing, but we are not affected by them in the same way. For what is essential in the idea, the kiss, is not expressed by Cibber, who besides this omission makes use of the prosaic and tautologous expression 'fix the seal,' and so succeeds in reducing passion to a red wafer. But he was incapable of seeing this, just as he was incapable of feeling the bathos of that 'And now,' and the absurdity of personifying eyes and arms in the same sentence with the personal pronoun, whereby Romeo is put into opposition instead of being identified with them.

The associations connected with a word or a phrase may help to make its meaning vivid as well as to elevate it. Take, for instance, the word 'dilate.' This is the word universally used to express the ex-

pansion of the pupil of the eye, and it is a well-known fact that a man's eye dilates when he is frightened. Consider this association of ideas in connexion with the word 'dilated' in the following passage from *Paradise Lost:*

> While thus he spake, the angelic squadron bright
> Turned fiery red, sharpening in moonèd horns
> Their phalanx, and began to hem him round
> With ported spears. . . .
> . . . On the other side, Satan, alarmed,
> Collecting all his might, dilated stood.

If for 'dilated' one puts 'expanded' nearly all the vividness of the vision escapes. Not only does dilated carry with it the association of fear, but by recalling the dilation of the eye it suggests an abnormal enlargement to the full limits under a temporary stress, such an enlargement of size as is natural to one 'collecting all his might.' It is the one word that is minutely appropriate to the complete expression of the idea. But indeed the passage is rich with examples of the power of association, as in that phrase 'moonèd horns,' which, while giving a picture of angels formed in a steady bright crescent, suggests at the same time their threatening aspect.

We can hardly read a line of poetry without having this indirect significance and suggestion of words forced on our notice; but I will give one more instance, this time from Blake's best known song:

> Tyger! tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night.

We all know what a tiger is like, but these lines show him to us more vivid, more awful, than we have

ever seen him. 'Burning bright' in conjunction with the idea of dark forests suggests a more than mortal tiger, a living firebrand moving stealthily through the jungle. One can almost see the fierce yellow eyes and 'massy-muscled' body, supple as a flame, as we know that Blake must have seen him, Blake who said, 'He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light, than his perishing mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all.' In these two lines of verse he has given us a nocturne in yellow and black: first the yellow and black tiger, then a yellow flame, then black forests. But besides this what a feeling of immensity and mystery there is in that expression 'forests of the night'! It is extraordinary how each word in the two lines intensifies and reflects the fiery picture.

From the foregoing examples it may be seen how poets use the associations of words to amplify their meaning, intensify it, and exalt it, and how they love words of pith and colour and music. The use of such words is sometimes abused as 'poetical diction.' And indeed nothing can be more ridiculous than for a man to use grandiloquent language to express ordinary feelings and thoughts, or take to stilts when he would be dancing. And poetical diction for prosaic thoughts is always preposterous. But it is equally preposterous to demand prosaic diction for poetical thoughts. A poet has a far wider range of mind and emotion than the ordinary man, and needs a larger and more delicate vocabulary to express himself with. If we want him to fly, we must not start by

clipping his wings, especially as we insist that he take us with him in his flight. Moreover, a poet does not use poetical words because they are poetical, but because they are the words which express him best. For, in truth, there is only one diction that is really poetic, and that is the one chosen by a real poet to express himself in, whether he writes a *Lucy Gray*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, or an *Oenone*. Almost any word in the language may be pressed into service of poetry, whether in itself poetical or not, as may be exemplified by the quotation given above from *The Ancient Mariner*, where the word 'silly' is highly poetical because it is highly expressive of Coleridge's thought. In fact, one might almost venture the paradox that it is by his use of unpoetical words that a man shows himself to be a true poet. Only it is to be borne in mind that by his use of them such unpoetical or neutral words become charged with poetry; and also that a man may be none the less a true poet if he confines his language, as Swinburne did, to words that have poetical associations; though extreme daintiness generally means a loss of strength or of the picturesque.

To get the most out of poetry, then, we have to learn to appreciate the justness and precision of words, the nice marking of delicate shades of distinction, the force, colour, and glow of the language, besides its music. And this soon becomes a keen, intellectual joy for the sake of which we are ready to wrestle with the knottiest construction, the most closely packed sentence, and even, some of us, to prefer poetry that challenges our brain-power, our

nimbleness of wit, at the expense of the music. But we must be willing to exert ourselves, we must lay ourselves open to receive fresh impressions, we must have feeling and imagination to vibrate in answer to the associations the poet plays on. The guest must bring something to the feast, if only an appetite. And the perfect poem always needs as its complement the perfect reader.

CHAPTER V

FEELING

IN the foregoing chapters I have tried to give some notion of the vehicle of the poet's art — words, and to show how important their selection and arrangement is owing to their providing the music and carrying the meaning of poetry. We are now ready to consider the raw material of poetry, which is first worked up by the imagination and then woven into language. This raw material consists of feeling and thought, and in this chapter I propose to talk about feeling.

We may admire poetry for many reasons; we may be grateful to it for a high expression of thoughts, for the picturing of our aspirations; but we love it for its emotional appeal, its recall of those sensations and feelings which alone have made life worth living. Not that they were all pleasurable at the time, but remembrance strains them clear from everything violent, harsh, and bitter, and shows even pain and grief in a chastened form that we may dwell on tenderly. And it is this remembrance that poetry revives. Country sights and sounds, romance, travel, and the sea are bells which, when struck, never fail to vibrate in us. And we have deeper, more sacred, recollections. In the sudden illumination of love, in the newborn life of convalescence, in some

rare glimpse — flashed perhaps by the stars — of the purpose and worth of existence we have been momentarily lifted out of the ruck of feeling into a fuller, wider, purer consciousness. But such moments are isolated, and their effects, powerful as they were, die away. The poet can revive them. He is more often upon that higher plane of consciousness than we, and the atmosphere of it is in his poetry, so that at times, as we read, we are caught up once more to those peaks from which we see spread out before us so marvellous a prospect.

For this reason poetry is a flag that men of all nations spontaneously salute. It stirs their associative memory and keeps alive in them feelings that the workaday world tends to destroy. The poet, starting with a finer sensibility than the normal, does all in his power to cultivate it. He lives largely through his emotions, which receive a stimulus from his impulse to embody them in words. Feeling gains from language, and language from feeling, just as the beauty of the word completes the beauty of an image, and the significance of a word is a standard for the rallying of fugitive thought.

But it is probable that the extent to which a poet's sensibility differs from the normal is hardly realized by the average reader, though it be admitted in general. Every man is inclined to think that the possibilities of pleasure and pain are exhausted by his own sensations; nor will anyone readily believe that impressions, which leave him fairly rigid, may heel a poet over to an emotional storm. He looks with suspicion on these stronger effects, produced

apparently by the same cause. When we read, in Keats's *Letters*, of his throwing his whole being into Shakespeare's *Troilus*, and of how, on repeating the lines, "I stalk about her door Like a strange soul upon the Stygian banks, Staying for waftage," he "melts into a delicate voluptuousness," we may think either that the poet exaggerates, or that such extreme sensibility is not quite wholesome. But on reading the biographies of other poets we shall find them all given to strange raptures, all deeply stirred by what would merely ruffle the surface of ordinary men, or not affect them at all. And though we need not take Coleridge literally when he says that a great poet must have "the ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent desert, the eyes of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an enemy upon the leaves that strew the forest, the touch of a blind man feeling the face of a darling child," he is only emphasizing the fact that poets are, in very truth, distinguished by nature with unusual sensibility of a very delicate kind. And if this is not quite wholesome, then poetry will have to fall under the same stigma, for it is the result of such sensibility.

To begin with, different as poets are in character, force of intellect, imagination, and passion, a delight in rich sensations, in the gorgeous, the vivid, the glowing is strongly marked in the imagery of all, even the most ascetic, as when the pious George Herbert, for instance, compares prayer to

> The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
> Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
> The land of spices ——

And this mounting of the blood to the fancy, this sensuousness of imagery, is based upon a relish of the senses. Every poet is, and must necessarily be, epicurean by temperament, however ascetic by reflection, principle, and habit, because he has to sing of joy, whether in Heaven or upon earth, of beauty, and delight, and he must feel the richness of life before he can reproduce it in his poetry. And if he did not feel it more deeply than other men he would not be able to reproduce it, since what is reproduced in words is at best but a shadow of reality; and unless the poet had within him the very light of joy, he could throw no image of pleasure upon others. And as with joy, so with sorrow and every other feeling common to humanity. The poet could not picture these, if they did not very strongly affect him; for it is the overflowing of the cup that pools into poetry.

Nor should it be forgotten that a poet's feelings are intensified by his imagination. What to us is a fine sunset, to him may be

> —— one magnificence
> Of multitudinous blossoms that o'er run
> The flaming brazen bowl o' the burnished sun; [1]

what to us are dead leaves whirled by the wind, to him may be

> ghosts from an enchanter fleeing; [2]

where we have but the abstract idea, pity, he may see a woman with

> Sky-worn robes of tenderest blue
> And eyes of dewy light.[3]

[1] Francis Thompson. [2] Shelley. [3] Collins.

And, again, a poet's feelings gain force from his power, like a child's, of complete absorption in the moment: not the average man's power of concentrating his attention and intellect on one point, but the power of surrendering his whole being to the influence of the hour, whether to bask in its beauty, be ringed in its melancholy, or inspired by its passion. Time, at those periods, does not so much flow past him as he floats with it, dreaming. And this power is both a strength and a weakness — a strength because it allows poets to coil their whole nature for a spring; a weakness because it tempts them to exaggeration. While enabling them

> To see a world in a grain of sand
> And a heaven in a wild-flower,

it also makes them cry:

> A Robin Redbreast in a cage
> Puts all heaven in a rage.

We may take it for granted, then, that a poet's joys and sorrows are, like those of Hyperion, 'portioned to a giant nerve,' and that he writes poetry first of all because he feels deeply. But here we must distinguish. Not everything that he feels deeply moves him to write. A poet is a man, it must be remembered, as well as a poet; and what he feels as a man he will express, like other men, in action or speech or silence. For there are feelings too intimate, too closely entwined with his life, to be detached for utterance; as there are others which demand instant translation into action. When Keats saw the butcher maltreating a boy, he did not

express his indignation in a sonnet, he knocked the butcher down; when Shelley found a poor woman lying ill at night in the road, he did not write an Ode on the Good Samaritan, but took her to his house and tended her. A poet must be able to hold off a feeling, in order to let the rays of imagination play upon it, before he can turn it into verse. Too near is as speechless as too far. When a man's whole nature is engaged in a struggle with distress of mind or body, he is too closely at grip with reality for there to be room for poetry. It is only when he has reaped the harvest of this emotion as a man that he can glean as a poet. And this, I think, was in Wordsworth's mind when he wrote that the origin of poetry was 'emotion recollected in tranquillity.' The saying is incomplete, but it brings out the importance of feeling, of memory that clears the central fact from disturbing reality and allows associations to gather round it, and of calmness that gives scope for the exercise of the artistic judgment. The pre-requisite of poetic composition is what Schiller called a musical mood, and this is incompatible with the turmoil of feeling on which a poet, like other men, must sometimes toss. For such a turmoil of feeling is not the excitement that attends the visit of the Muse, the excitement of production which takes the poet out of himself, but an overwhelming wave surging out of life, shattering imagination, submerging art, and forcing the poet into the cold depths of fact. When the shock has passed, when he can 'recollect the emotion in tranquillity,' he may be able to throw a veil of imagination over it and use it for

the purposes of art; but not before. Fact is but a stone cast into water, poetry the ripples it produces in ever-widening circles.

Feeling, then, of some sort is the root of all good poetry, lyrical, dramatic, or narrative; taking lyrical poetry to be that which has as its ground the personal feelings of the poet, and dramatic and narrative poetry to be that which gives us the emotions and actions of imaginary characters. But we must be careful to understand what is meant by this rather rough distinction, since there is sometimes a confusion in people's minds between what they call a real and an imaginary, by which is meant an imagined, feeling. There is really no difference between them, as regards poetry, except perhaps in degree. We either have a feeling or we are without it, and we cannot imagine the feelings of others without, to some extent, feeling them ourselves. If we do not feel them, we have not imagined them, but only thought of them; quite a different thing. When we think of a thing, we take a cold abstract of it into our minds; when we imagine a thing, it has for us the whole content of reality except actual existence. But the content of a feeling is its existence, so that an imagined feeling (if our imaginations are strong enough) act on us in the same way as, and cannot be distinguished from, a real feeling. The difference between them is not a difference of feeling, but a difference in what moves the feeling and what, in our lives, results from it. The feelings are actual in both cases, as actual as the tears we may shed in a theatre. But in the one case a poet when he

writes is moved by fact, *i.e.* something that has actually happened; in the other case he is moved by his imagination, by something, that is, which has not happened in real life, or not happened to him.

When a poet is deficient in feeling and writes mainly with his wit and common sense, we may get something to admire, as we may admire Butler's *Hudibras* or Pope's *Essay on Man;* but he does not touch us. In the same way we are not moved by a poet who, though full of feeling for certain aspects of life, writes a poem on a subject unsympathetic to him, one, therefore, which does not stir his feelings either by fact or through his imagination. We may see this by a comparison between Wordsworth's *Laodameia* and his *Michael.*

Laodameia is a poem founded on a Greek legend to this effect: Protesilaus, the first Greek to set foot on Trojan soil, was according to prophecy slain by Hector. His wife Laodameia, whom he had married but the day before, implored the gods to restore her husband, and they allowed him to return to earth for three hours. When the time had passed, Laodameia, unable to bear the thought of a second separation, sacrificed her life to be with her husband, even in Hades. Here, then, was a theme, if there ever was one, for passionate treatment. But mark the advice given in the poem by the husband to the wife who, on seeing him restored to life in answer to her prayer, rushes to embrace him:

> Be taught, O faithful consort, to control
> Rebellious passion!

Does not this seem eminently Wordsworthian advice, but at the same time hardly characteristic of a young Greek hero, and in any case a little dashing to the feelings?

But let us now turn to *Michael*, and read that pathetic tale. The difference is soon felt. The genuine emotion of that poem, austerely told as it is, informs every line. The poet's heart is in his work. The old shepherd lives for us; Protesilaus is a lay figure, and leaves us cold. And the reason is that Michael was a more congenial subject to Wordsworth, more sympathetic to his feelings, which have in consequence flowed into it. And we may notice this in other poets, and may take it as a rule to which there is no exception, that a poet's work is strong, high, and good only when his feelings are deeply stirred, and that if he attempts to portray emotions which, whether in his own character or that of another, he has felt but weakly, through want of sympathy or any other cause, his work will in consequence be comparatively feeble and ineffective, as unsympathetic to his readers as it was to himself. In the front rank we have a poet like Shakespeare whose sympathies seem universal. Yet even in his case we can find an illustration of what has just been said. No one will maintain that it was out of his power to show us a worthy Caesar; he had his Plutarch before him; and yet what a pitiful caricature of that great man he has given us. And what a drop, too, from the *Iliad* to *Troilus and Cressida!* One is tempted to believe that Shakespeare had a spite against the classics; perhaps because they were perpetually

being quoted against him by Ben Jonson at the 'Mermaid'! But whatever the reason, there is an obvious want of sympathy in these plays, which acts adversely on most of the characters.

We see from these instances that, though sensibility of feeling is common to poets, they are not equally sensitive to any or to every kind of feeling. Thinking of the two men, we can no more picture Herrick writing a poem like *Michael*, than Wordsworth writing an Epithalamium like the *Nuptiall Song on Sir Clipesby Crew and His Lady*. It is our privilege as readers to get delight from the genuine expression of every kind of feeling, from the gay to the sublime, because each of us being an epitome of human nature, there is no human feeling that cannot touch us, always provided that it is sifted fine by imagination and put before us with sincerity. But without such help we could not enter into feelings and emotions outside those for which we have a natural disposition. And it is the same with poets. They can only write adequately of what they have at heart; and since few men are so balanced in their natures as not to incline to one feeling more than another, a poet's work as a whole will clearly indicate his natural limitations of sensibility.

But let us now be a little more specific, and consider whether there are any ranks in feeling, or whether sincerity is enough to place all poets on an equal footing from the emotional point of view. There is a class of poets, having delicate sensibility without great depth, and tenderness of feeling without great force. We read such poets, as, for exam-

ple, Cowper, with pleasure in certain moods, their emotions, though not stormy, being at least genuine. But we do not put them in the same rank with poets of passion.

Passion is elemental force of spirit. Sensibility may be refined or blunted by training or environment; passion is nature's fire, which not even old age can extinguish. It may be controlled, but it cannot be hidden, for we may define it as flaming sincerity. Though it sometimes exaggerates, hurling Pelion on Ossa in a titanic struggle for expression, there is nothing forced in its exaggerations; they are a natural outcome of such a state, quite unlike the bluster and rodomontade of mere rhetoric. When Hotspur cries:

> By Heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
> To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
> Or dive into the bottom of the deep,
> Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,
> And pluck up drowning honour by the locks,

he speaks the exaggerated language of real passion. When Pope in his *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* exclaims:

> But when through all the infernal bounds
> Which flaming Phlegethon surrounds,
> Love, strong as death, the poet led
> To the pale nations of the dead,
> What sounds were heard,
> What scenes appeared,
> O'er all the dreary coasts!
> Dreadful gleams,
> Dismal screams,
> Fires that glow,

Shrieks of woe,
Sullen moans,
Hollow groans,
And cries of tortured ghosts!

we are left quite cold by these hysterical shrieks, he is so obviously flogging his Muse for a little heat.

Much will be forgiven strength, much demanded of weakness. Passion, swirling an emotional torrent through banks of metre and rhythm, snatches at and carries us away; and we give ourselves to the exhilarating rush, content with mere swiftness. On a slower stream we have leisure to look about, and need beautiful, or sublime, or at any rate interesting, scenery to compensate the loss of excitement. It was the passion in the man that still keeps Donne's verses alive and makes us content to chase intellectual will-o'-the-wisps by the dozen for the chance of warming ourselves an instant at the glow of his furnace. It is the passion in that sonnet of Drayton's beginning "Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part" that lifts it head and shoulders above the rank and file of Elizabethan sonnets. For passion is the true inspiration, that "divine madness" of which Plato speaks in the *Phaedrus:* madness because the poet has no command over it, divine madness because the Muses have, and what the poet writes under its influence is thenceforth sacred to them. It cannot create qualities, it fires those already there. It cannot give Byron Keats' love of beauty, nor Keats the lofty spirit of Shelley, nor Shelley the warm vitality of Browning, nor Browning the music of Tennyson. But it combines with the materials at hand, and takes

its colour from them, its direction from the poet's personality; being the motive force at the back of character. And for this reason it shows more strongly in poetry than in prose; because the more you restrict a force the more it strives for expansion; and poetry, with its metre and rhyme, has far straiter bounds than prose. And so Poetry

> Tempered holds the young blood-heat,
> Yet through measured grave accord,
> Hears the heart of wildness beat
> Like a centaur's hoof on sward.[1]

It is sometimes assumed by young people that passion is only genuine when it is foaming at the mouth. They mistake rant for passion, because they think that the latter cannot be controlled. And, besides this, they take it for granted that there is but one passion — love. They are therefore unable to find any passion in Milton; and would be prepared to swear any day that Byron was far more passionate than Shelley. They speak, indeed, of some one having a passion for bridge or chess or sport, but this they would hold to be a mere way of talking.

We have seen, however, that the poetic form in itself gives a certain check to passion, by making it necessary for the poet to take thought of his language, metre, and rhythm. But just as this unavoidable check of poetic form intensifies passion, so the subduing it to the direction of the intellect only increases its force. And when the term passion is used in connexion with poetry, it should be borne in mind

[1] George Meredith, *The Woods of Westermain.*

that it does not stand as a single word representing the passions, but for elemental force of feeling, whether the feeling be for love or beauty or anything else that may be in a poet's heart. The grandly vast and awful, treated with passion, gives the sublime, the ruthlessness of fate, the pathetic; and passion is as necessary to the effective representation of sublimity and pathos as to the effective representation of love.

If passion is held a virtue of poetry, its opposing vice is sentimentality. Sentimentality is a laxity of feelings that have escaped the wholesome restraint of the judgment. It is not necessarily insincere feeling, but a straining of words out of proportion to feeling, and feeling out of proportion to nature. There is an inevitable suggestion of gush about it. And this is fatal to poetry. It is not the same thing as mawkishness, and it must be distinguished, too, from the turgid outpourings of a real poet in his youthful struggles with his art. *Endymion* is inflated, and in parts mawkish, but it cannot justly be called sentimental. What is sentimental is thin; in *Endymion* is richness and copiousness; and though the richness is cloudy and the copiousness too unrestrained, there is no fault in the poem that increased knowledge could not rectify. Power was there, and only waited for control; but sentimentality is the outcry of weakness. It is therefore generally the mark of the poetaster, who takes prettiness for beauty and shallow feeling for passion.

Coleridge is the only real poet we have who was at heart a sentimentalist. There are poems of his, like the *Lines to a Young Ass*, which it seems incredible he

could have allowed to be published. And there are many of them. Moreover, it may be noticed that the poems which most endear his name to us, *Kubla Khan*, *Christabel*, and *The Ancient Mariner*, are not poems of sentiment, but musical raptures or fantasies. Unlike Wordsworth, contact with earth, as Swinburne has said, took all the strength out of him. He was at his best in the air.

Besides its emotional value, feeling has in poetry a technical value. It gives unity. What logical development does for prose, feeling does for a poem: it binds it together. It is this inner unity of feeling that causes the outward unity of form, of which I have already spoken, because it prompts the selection of words and imagery. And so it comes about that every verse in the perfect lyric is, as it were, a bud that expands to the full flower only in the whole poem. On the other hand, should any verse be written in a different state of feeling from the rest the whole poem will suffer. For this reason there is always a danger that when a poet retouches his verses with the desire of bettering them, he may do more harm than good, and amend the form of part at the expense of the tone of the whole. Herein, too, lies the value of spontaneity, which secures for us a fresh and harmonious feeling, and gives a poem a natural air that a labored mosiac, however beautiful, loses.

In any judgment, then, of a poem, our first concern is with its feeling. Has it passion, or is it at least sincere? Is the feeling spontaneous and harmonious? These are the general questions we ask ourselves. And next, what quality of feeling distinguishes this

from other poems? What peculiar sympathy does it show? For there is something in every poet's work that distinguishes it, something that no other could give. And it is this we must try to seize, for this is what constitutes the poet's individuality. Each has his special gift of feeling and does his best work only when giving it expression.

But, after all, we do not, if we are ordinary people, read poetry in order to judge it, but to get pleasure from it. From this point of view it is worth remembering that our pleasure will largely depend on our associative memories. If it were possible for a man's ideas to be wholly trivial, mean, or base, he could never feel poetry; he would have nothing in his nature to respond to it, no beautiful or touching associations to be set moving. But, on the other hand, the wider, more beautiful, and elevated a man's feelings, the more numerous and finer are the chords poetry can strike, and the greater consequently will be the pleasure it will give him. If the mind has never been allowed to dwell on what is degrading or unhealthy it will readily welcome the beautiful, noble, and wholesome, both in nature and art, and observation and reading will widen the scope of enjoyment. This is one reason why young people are attracted to poetry, because they find in it something that answers to their healthy love of life, their still unsullied aspirations, and their capacity for reverence. The poet moves them because he too enjoys, aspires, and reverences. And those of us who have left youth behind, do we not love everything that reminds us of its bright side; and where

shall we find that better represented than in poetry?

To sum up. Nature has made the poet of finer clay than ours, so that he enjoys and suffers more. He therefore remembers more; and when he falls into the reverie in which poetry is conceived, and finds a theme round which his feelings may cluster, his memory is full of vivid experiences, and his imagination active, so that his emotion quickly takes a concrete form. The stronger this emotion the more his words vibrate with it, and set up in us, his readers, a corresponding vibration. And since he sings of what we too have felt and dreamed, the emotion produced in us by his music runs back along the path of old associations and gives us the greatest delight. We are, for the time being, enlarged in our natures and raised in our estimations, because we see part of our own experience sublimated, made stronger, and more beautiful; our own longings expressed as we could never express them, though we wanted to; and those glimpses of a higher life rarely vouchsafed by Nature, the feeling of the unity of all things, of the spirit in all things, of the contented merging of self in the whole, these are again revealed to us, not directly, but through the music and emotion of the poetry. By this appeal to the stock of feeling common to humanity the particular emotion of the poet becomes universal in its effects. What moves him personally, now, if he is a great artist, moves the world. But before he can make others feel, he must first, either directly or through his imagination, himself have felt. And the more vividly and intensely he feels, the more power he has over the feelings of others.

CHAPTER VI

THOUGHT

THE heart flowers before the head; and sentiment in poetry is, to the young, more attractive than thought. And one would not alter this if one could. Callous youth foretells a mercenary manhood, nor is a preponderance of feeling a taste for luxury, but a necessity for healthy growth. It is as natural and good at a certain age to spurn Pope and adore Swinburne, as it is for a colt to kick up his heels in a pasture and lash out at all attempts to saddle him. Nor does it by any means follow that an increase of years will bring a reversal of our youthful preferences and dislikes. Though then but blind lovers and haters, now that our eyes are opened we may find that our instincts were no less true than our judgment, and that though perhaps our admiration was too unqualified it was not misdirected. Still it often happens that we give our first worship to false gods, being as we then are, so much in love with emotion and so charged with it ourselves that the poorest idol may provoke it and be hailed as divine. But when we are broken in to life, with many illusions gone and many ideals seen to be worthless, and a great deal of the meaning of that mighty word experience has been construed, we are out of sympathy with bubbles, however beautiful, and ask for

something no less beautiful but stronger and more enduring. It is then that we begin to understand what Matthew Arnold means by calling poetry 'a criticism of life'; and we realize for the first time that those bells, whose mellow tones we have so often admired, are calling to some great service of humanity.

On the other hand, if our intellect and not our feelings have first led us to poetry, it is more than probable that we shall give Matthew Arnold's phrase a different interpretation from the one given by that fine poet and critic himself. What he meant by a criticism of life was, in his own words, 'the powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life.' And it is here that they go wrong, who have come to poetry for a criticism of life without having first been attracted to it as a representation of the beauty and passion of life. Merely because their intellect or their ethics cries, "It is so," they call that good poetry which is really only something they approve of as good reason or good morals, or both. But what is good reason or good morals may be very bad poetry. It may also be very good poetry; but what makes it so will not be the reasons or the morals, but, among other things, their powerful and beautiful application to life.

One of our most notable philosophical poems is Sir John Davies's *Nosce Teipsum*, an examination into the nature of the soul. He comes to the conclusion that

> The soul a substance and a spirit is,
> Which God Himself doth in the body make;
> Which makes the man; for every man from this
> The nature of a man and name doth take, etc.

The theme is discussed and unfolded in an appalling number of verses, but many of the thoughts are just, some fine, and the versification is smooth enough. Yet it very rarely, if ever, rises to poetry.

Again, Wordsworth in his *Excursion* writes:

> One adequate support
> For the calamities of mortal life
> Exists — one only; an assured belief
> That the procession of our fate, howe'er
> Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
> Of infinite benevolence and power;
> Whose everlasting purposes embrace
> All accidents, converting them to good —

which may be good theology or good doctrine, as it is undoubtedly a comforting and supporting faith, but, on the other hand, it assuredly is not good poetry. And yet if the powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life constitutes good poetry, Wordsworth has as just a claim as anyone to the title of poet. What then could have led him to introduce such bare bones of belief among a living company? Or why does Browning sometimes give us mere clever sophistry for poetry?

The reason seems to be that a poet lives in a two-fold world — the world of actuality and the world of ideality — and that what interests him as a man does not necessarily interest him as a poet. If it does, we get the best possible combination — that of thought and imagination. But if it does not, then the thought is left naked and hard and fitter for prose, unless — and this is an important exception — unless it is covered by the dignity or picturesqueness of

style, or carried through by intensity of feeling. Milton gives us many lines of bare abstractions, but throws his mantle of style over them with a grand sweep; so that, the ear being paid in full, the imagination is content to go begging. When, however, ear and imagination and feeling are all starved, no amount of food for thought will prevent poetry from dwindling to verse. For though there is nothing in the world or out of it that may not be treated in poetry, yet it if be not in itself poetical it must be made so — that is, must be so treated as to stir feeling or imagination in those even who might hate or despise the naked reality. And this cannot be done unless the poet feels and thinks his subject-matter as a poet and not merely as a man.

The appeal of morality or reason to kindred morality or conviction, when made direct and not through the medium of imagination, becomes a sermon, a lecture, a disquisition, not a poem; and this, not on account of the subject-matter, but on account of its treatment. For if good doctrine is enough in itself to make good poetry, then bad doctrine should make bad poetry. But does it? Who that knows his *Omar* will admit it?

> Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
> The Winter garment of Repentance fling:
> The Bird of Time has but a little way
> To fly — and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing.

Besides, if anyone were to argue that the best poetry has always a good moral tendency and that since this verse is immoral it cannot be good poetry, we might cordially agree with his major premise, and for the

sake of argument admit his minor, and yet deny his conclusion, which (to speak logically) is based on the fallacy of ambiguity. For, first, the representation of what is immoral may have a good moral tendency, like the drunken Helot; second, what is beautiful has in itself a good moral tendency; and third, the sincere expression of a man's honest convictions and beliefs has a good moral tendency. And the question in such a case is seen to be: What, after all, is a poem with a good moral tendency? For if by this expression is meant a poem which directly inculcates a man's particular code of morality, then his syllogism will run — all good poetry directly inculcates my particular code of morality; this does not; therefore it is not good poetry. Similar reasoning, with science put for poetry, brought Galileo under the ban of Inquisition.

But however inept it may be to judge art by the canons of morality, it is no less inept to maintain that art has no sort of connexion with morality. Art is at bottom always personal; and no matter how impersonal the presentation of the subject-matter may be, a work of art can no more avoid taking something of the nature of the maker than a spring can avoid absorbing something of the soil through which it percolates. Shakespeare was as impersonal as possible in his art; and so, in a less degree and in a smaller sphere, was Browning; yet the general character of each is recognizable in his work. And if this is so with objective poets, it is far more obvious in poets of a subjective tendency. In short, no one believes that Herrick was by disposition an ascetic, or

Milton a boon companion; that Ben Jonson was meek, or Shakespeare bad-tempered; for in the main their virtues and vices are broadly shown in their works. Since, then, every poet is necessarily a moral agent, and since his work is coloured by his personality, it is to that extent influenced by his morality; so that if his nature is puritanic his work will have that cast; if pleasure-loving, precise, noble, generous, high-spirited, grand, these qualities will appear in his interpretation of what affects him. On the contrary, the immoral poet, one, that is, who is at the mercy of his passions in his art, or one who is attracted by vicious subjects merely because they are vicious, can never be a great poet, for he has an unhealthy mind, and therefore cannot give things their true proportions.

Moreover, the art that would try to keep clear of morality and philosophy and limit itself entirely to beauty would not only be cooping itself up quite unnecessarily, but would be denying the existence of a moral and intellectual beauty compatible with beauty of form. But art does not, and could not, tie its hands in that way. Morality pervades the whole of every man and affects his outlook on life, so that the very belief that morality has nothing to do with art is itself a moral — or, if you prefer it, an immoral — belief.

In this wide sense of the word, then, it may certainly be said that art is very intimately connected with morality, because morality is very intimately connected with life. But this is far from saying that the poet's aim is, or should be, a direct moral one. Even those who regard art as an instrument of moral

education must see that their end will be obtained far better if art is allowed to work in its own wide way, rather than to try to usurp the place now filled by lectures, tracts, and sermons. For he who turns away in impatience from these to sit an hour 'with old Khayyám' and fill his heart with beauty and his soul with melancholy, has but taken a deeper purer draught of the divine, fresh from the spring of nature. And if it was the beauty of the cup that tempted him to drink, what matter — since he drank?

But to go back to the proper functions of thought in poetry. There are some often quoted lines in *Lycidas* which contain a phrase that concerns us here:

> Alas! what boots it with incessant care
> To tend the homely, slighted, shepherd's trade,
> And strictly meditate the thankless Muse?

The question is: What is implied in this strict meditation of the Muse? How does it differ from strict meditation on other things, or from other kinds of meditation?

One may meditate, like Swift, on a broomstick; or like Tennyson on a 'Flower in the crannied wall'; and the result will be mockery or philosophy, according to the spirit of the meditation and the intellect of the thinker. Or instead of a single fact we may meditate on a series of facts — a theme. And this theme may be life and its ultimate problems. But religion, science, and metaphysics, as well as art, deal with facts and themes, each — it is to be noticed — in a different way. And these methods all differ from those of poetry, for the simple reason that,

as Shelley puts it, 'nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse.' Poetry, therefore, having something to express which prose cannot, just as religion, science, and metaphysics each supplies something the rest cannot, has its peculiar method of treating thought, imagination, and feeling. And this entails meditation on theme treatment and matter, which results in a certain selection of words and ideas best fitted to the parts and to the whole.

And first as to the theme. The importance of this in epic and dramatic poetry is obvious, but it is not so generally recognized in lyrical poetry. And yet on reflection we shall see that if the whole idea, the theme, of a poem is prosaic, the effect of this must be not only to produce antagonism between the whole and its parts, however poetically these latter many be treated, but also to lower the general plane of the poem, since what is essentially prosaic can never inspire poetry. Accordingly we shall find that our best lyrics have always a poetical theme. As to what constitutes a poetical theme, it may be said broadly that every theme is poetical which when reduced to prose gives imaginative pleasure in itself. Here are three examples: The forlornness of winter meadows without flowers and happy girls to pick them (Herrick, *To Meadows*). A lover riding by moonlight to visit his beloved, on seeing the moon sinking behind her cottage, fears she may be dead (Wordsworth, *Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known*). The fascination of gypsy life (Browning, *The Flight of the Duchess*). These are genuine poetic themes, such

as in themselves may set the dullest imagination working. And the great gain to a poem starting from themes of this kind is obvious. Goethe indeed insists very strongly on the importance of the theme. 'No one,' says he, 'dreams that the true power of a poem consists in the situation — in the theme (*motiv*). Dilettanti, and especially women, have very weak ideas in poetry. They usually think, if they could but get quit of the technical part, they would have the essential, but they are much mistaken.' And this is the reason why satiric, political, didactic, and metaphysical poems take a lower rank in the poetic world than any other kind of serious poetry. The theme drags the poet down in spite of his struggles. While, on the contrary, a beautiful, significant, graceful, or naïve theme will sometimes float a poem over a weak treatment.

Legends, myths, and fairy tales are inexhaustible in the supply of poetic themes, and will always be a happy hunting-ground for poets and versifiers. But only the poet is able to take a poetic theme, first hand, from nature. Though convention itself should guard the tree, he will be another Hercules to rob it, if the fruit be worth having. And none but he knows poetic value in the rough. Others may mistake the appearance of the desired object or be frightened by its surroundings, but the poet has that within him which, like a divining-rod, dips unerringly to treasure, however rugged the soil; and once convinced it is there, he will dig it up at any labour. Nor as a rule has he to dig deep. Whatever is beautifully natural is poetic; and of such material there will always be

abundance, as long as there are women and children and flowers in the world.

But with the selection of a theme meditation of the Muse has but begun. Its treatment has now to be considered; whether, that is, the theme shall be evolved with simplicity or elaboration, lyrically or dramatically, with a light touch or gravely, and so on. Next follows the choice of metre; and when the execution has begun, and words and ideas throng forward and press for admittance into the poem, meditation summons the judgment to advise as to which shall be allowed in, and which kept out; and when this is decided, the imagination takes each successful idea in hand in order to bring out the utmost beauty, power, significance, or charm that is in it, surrendering them in turn to harmony, who gives them such place and rank in the line as best serves to show them off, while preserving the proportions and adding to the beauty and strength of the whole.

From want of such strict meditation of the Muse many a good theme has been spoiled. Ideas and images, beautiful or interesting in themselves and in fit environment, may nevertheless be quite incongruous with the ideas and images around them, and produce a discord which leaves a disagreeable impression. Or the introduction of something prosaic, especially at the climax of the theme, may utterly ruin the whole, even if it have beautiful parts. Wordsworth, for instance, has quite spoiled the charming theme given above by one false phrase in the climax. The descending moon has at length dropped behind Lucy's cottage roof:

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
Into a lover's head!
'O mercy!' to myself I cried,
'If Lucy should be dead!'

The ridiculous inadequateness of this lady's-maid ejaculation gives a mawkish turn to the whole, and wrecks what might have been as signal a triumph, in a different way, as *The Solitary Reaper*, an example of a beautiful theme beautifully treated.

And since we may learn to appreciate successful treatment by seeing how even genuine poets sometimes go astray for want, not of strict meditation, but of strict meditation of the Muse, let us consider another poem, a lyric by George Herbert, called *Virtue*. Of the four verses, the first three are very beautiful and harmonious, and had the fourth been equal to them this lyric would rank as his best. Unhappily it falls far below the others, which is the sadder because the theme turns upon it:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright!
The bridal of the earth and sky, —
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night,
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie,
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal
Then chiefly lives.

Dr. Courthope, in his *History of English Poetry*, is of opinion that by 'coal' in this last verse Herbert meant charcoal, 'implying that, as the cinder of burnt wood is converted into fresh fuel for the fire, so by its perception of the vanity of the world, the soul gains for itself new life and vigour.' Readers of George Herbert are not likely to quarrel with this interpretation as being too far-fetched; but assuming that was his meaning, still this does not mend his expression or help the prosaic incongruity of the lines. Had he thought more of his Muse we should think more of his idea.

Besides being spoiled by incongruous ideas, a poem may be hampered by an excess of ideas. When the brain is fertile and quick and the spirit eager, there is the risk that an idea will not be allowed full development before it gives place to another, which may be cut off prematurely by a third, and so on, with the natural result of overcrowding — a loss of ease and grace. And unless an idea has, as it were, elbow-room, half its force is gone. Moreover, the reader has a feeling of oppression from the crush, and may easily find a poem obscure which is really but mentally unpunctuated, allowing no pause for breath, and not sufficiently marking the transition of the thought. There are, for example, passages in Shakespeare, in Browning, and George Meredith (to take poets in so many ways widely different)

so tight packed with ideas, that in reading them the mind is congested, and a great deal of the effect aimed at lost; whereas if they had given us less we should perhaps have gained more.

This, however, is a somewhat uncommon defect. Indeed, from another point of view it may be considered a virtue; at any rate, it marks the possession of one. For exuberance of some kind is an essential of genius: exuberance of vitality, of feeling, of thought, of imagination; and exuberance of ideas is the rarest and most valuable. When that compelling energy which drives to expression comes from the brain it will, though in alliance but with wit, strike its roots far and deep, and outlive many a pretty blossom of fancy, many a well-turned and polished bit of literary art; as witness the *Dunciad*, *Hudibras*, and *Don Juan*. But when it is combined with nobility and force of feeling and imagination, then indeed we have something to stem the current of time and challenge oblivion. We must, though, be careful not to mistake mere copiousness of words for exuberance of thought. As a rule, a flow of words is in inverse proportion to the number and subtlety of ideas (for nothing can skim over inanity easier than language), whereas fullness and complexity of thought often go with a confused and jerky utterance — which must be a consolation to some of our parliamentary orators. Nor should simplicity of presentation be taken to indicate want of depth. The test in all cases is permanence of interest. True thought is enduringly responsive.

But let us pass now from the 'strict meditation of the Muse' and go back to the 'criticism of life.'

A man in serious pursuit of truth with his intellect alone would not think of going to poetry for it. He would consider that no one in his senses, who was making appeal solely to reason, would hamper his arguments with the artificial obstructions of verse, which, however excellent for clenching a maxim or pointing an epigram, is not so fit an instrument for the logical development of thought as prose. And he would be right; for poetry, so far as it is concerned with truth, does not give the steps by which its results are reached, only the results themselves. But no man, in fact, does go to poetry for such truth as can only be grasped by the intellect. He who reads poetry for a criticism of life believes that the intellect has no monopoly of truth, but that feeling, intuition, instinct, faith have a share of it. He goes to poetry consequently that his feelings may be touched and exalted, his sympathies aroused, his knowledge made broader. He goes to poetry that his faith in the ultimate good of things may be strengthened, his eyesight purified. He goes to poetry for wisdom, not arguments; visions, not dogmas; an apocalypse, not a philosophical system. He looks for beautiful thoughts winged by feeling, imagination, and music. He expects that dull generalities shall be split into a hundred flashing fragments, reflecting the light and colour of experience; that the winter tree of the intellect shall be in leaf and blossom once again under the second spring of poetry, as it was under the first of youth.

And that is why he resents the blunt and direct expression of thought in a poem unless such expression

is carried through by force of feeling, the music of the verse, or the sweep of style. Nor does he want dry, abstract, general statements; such shrivelled skins he can pick up for himself by the roadside. What he wants is the filling, the flesh and juice of the fruit. No criticism of life is bearable in poetry that has not the breath of life blowing through it. The thought must be steeped in experience, and the expression redolent of it. "We live by Admiration, Hope, and Love," says Wordsworth; but it is not so. We do not live by such abstract terms, but by what they stand for to each of us, by the memories of our hero-worship, of the bleakness and blankness of existence enriched and filled for us at such-and-such a time and place, in this or that way, and by the belief that such experiences will be repeated or continued. The poet must have had his own filling of these words in mind when he wrote them, but it is not enough for a poet to speak from experience — what he says must also, to be approved, go to experience. Our memories, however, are not stirred by such general words which are too cold and far off from the detailed vividness of reality. Poetry should be substantial, particular, glowing, with blood coursing through its veins; then it stirs us, then we know it is true, for we have lived it. When a poet speaks direct from his general philosophy of life he must speak with fervour, exaltation, or sweetness; the mere conviction that he is speaking the truth is not enough. The *Ode to Duty* is successful, for it combines the fervour of the man and the poet in a noble whole. But there is always the danger, especially when a poet takes up

his final position towards life as early as Wordsworth did, of his living with his views so constantly that the bare statement of them can no longer rouse him to enthusiasm; he knows that what he says is true, but there may be no freshness of conviction, and consequently no feeling, no character, no charm, in what he says. He needs some fact, incident, or thought in the illustration of which poetry and philosophy may mingle, the poetry stimulating the philosophy, the philosophy strengthening the poetry, as it did so often with Wordsworth. Otherwise he gives us but unemotional truth in a barren form — a label on an empty box.

In some way, then, whether by metaphor, figure, picture, allegory, dream, or story, thought must, before it is rendered in verse, be transfigured, that it may stir the imagination; or else, if given directly, the matrix in which it is embedded must be given too, that it may stir feeling. A thought that appeals merely to the understanding has no character; a thought that is dry, abstract, and general has no charm; and a poetical thought must have either one or the other or both. It may be quaint, eerie, passionate, sublime, grim, or beautiful, etc.; but some character it must have, simple or complex, to remove it from the commonplace, the vulgar, the prosaic, and the dull. Nor must it be merely witty or humorous, though wit and humour may form part of the ingredients. For the poet is in earnest; even the most freakish form his thought may take veils a seriousness of purpose; and *The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* contains a criticism of life no less than *Abt Vogler* or *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

The expression of a thought will naturally be more direct in dramatic poetry than in purely lyrical poetry. Dramatic poetry — and I do not mean poetic drama — depicts the emotions of another's soul from within; a story is assumed and its development hinted at or expressed; and this leads to a different treatment from that of purely lyrical poetry. That aims at beauty; dramatic poetry at the expression of character, or action, and emotional significance. It will, therefore, generally use language that is more colloquially direct, less elaborated. Our sympathy has to be won, or our interest excited, for a point of view which may be quite foreign to us, and which therefore has to be made plain. And the expression has to fit the mouth supposed to be speaking. Psychological insight, dramatic feeling and skill, verisimilitude, and vividness count for more than beauty and music. Contrast, for instance, the rough verse, the vivid and detailed picturesqueness, the story-telling glow and colour and rattle of the earlier part in *The Flight of the Duchess* with the quiet and smooth intensity and beauty of the gypsy's invocation in it, which is purely lyrical and wholly different in tone and manner. That is a dramatic romance. In dramatic lyrics such as his *Christina, A Woman's Last Word, Any Wife to Any Husband,* the thoughts are simply expressed, but carried through by force of feeling and their intrinsic interest. That is to say, in dramatic poetry the drama, the emotional crisis, its effects upon the thoughts, and the drawing of character, are the important parts, and to these grace and beauty may be sacrificed, for

the main object of the poet is to interest us and move us with a view of life. In the pure lyric we have to be captivated. There the thoughts are, so to speak, played with, fondled. They are charming in themselves and charmingly set out. The poet loves them and dwells tenderly on them:

When her mother tends her before the laughing mirror,
Tying up her laces, looping up her hair,
Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded,
More love should I have, and much less care.
When her mother tends her before the lighted mirror,
Loosening her laces, combing down her curls,
Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded,
I should miss but one for the many boys and girls.

Set that verse from George Meredith's *Love in a Valley* against this from Browning's *Any Wife to Any Husband:*

My love, this is the bitterest, that thou
Who art all truth, and who dost love me now
As thine eyes say, as thy voice breaks to say —
Should'st love me truly and could'st love me still
A whole life long through, had but love its will,
Would death, that leads me from thee, brook delay.

There is passionate feeling in both poems; there is thought in both poems; but there is a criticism of life only in the second, as there is beauty only in the first. Browning has taken a single thought, striking deep into the relations between the sexes, and has developed it verse by verse dramatically, forcibly. Once we have grasped this central idea, in this and his other dramatic lyrics, all fits into its place; every word adds something either to the verisimilitude of

the scene, the character, and emotional state of the speaker, or the unfolding of the main thought on which the poems are strung. Relying upon the intrinsic interest of this thought and the hinted drama which displays it to the best advantage, he concerns himself more with the whole than the parts of his poem, with the fitting of the pieces rather than their polish, knowing that this interest and the pressure of the feeling will urge the reader on so that he will not miss the beauty and finish of detail, the gusto of expression, he would find in a pure lyric. And it is, in fact, this central thought that remains with us, as Browning meant it should; feeling its way into our experience of life, our knowledge of men and women, and developing for us a pleasure in the finer shades of thought, the subtler and more delicate forms of tragedy and comedy.

The "beautiful and powerful application of ideas to life," may thus treat of only a small part of life, or picture the relations of but one being to life, or it may widen out into dealing with the ultimate problems of existence, and reason high

> Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate.

Thought shows itself in the "strict meditation of the Muse," and leads to beauty as well as to a criticism of life. But thought, giving insight into nature in its widest sense, based on experience, profoundly felt, and livingly and beautifully expressed, that is the best thing poetry has to give. And such thought is poetic wisdom. That is only to be found in the greatest poets, for they alone have minds wide

enough to absorb all kinds of experience, and powerful enough to wring wisdom from it; and they alone can make wisdom sing. It is thus the highest thing poetry can give, because it is an harmonious union of all her gifts. It is broad and simple as sunshine, herein differing from the intellectual subtlety of the so-called metaphysical poets, which is a form of wit rather than wisdom, and springs wholly from the brain. Neither is it didactic, except indirectly, as all poetry is; nor sententious. There is nothing of the Polonius in it, no striving to instruct or teach, no one-sided maxims, no conscious moralizing, no strain, no fuss. It is the falling of ripe fruit in a quiet orchard. Its note is maturity, fullness of thought and utterance; and it gains acquiescence at once and for ever, not stirring doubt or opposition. While cleverness may dazzle us with its brilliance, until we shade our eyes and see that it has no heart; while passion may carry us away in its rush, until we find ourselves plunged into a frothy maelstrom of mere words; poetic wisdom neither excites nor deceives, but satisfies; for under a beautiful countenance it has a solid body of truth with a great heart beating in it, and comes to us as a loved friend and comforter. In it matter and mind seem to have passed into one another and become indistinguishable, the shape is so at one with the thought; as in those lines, perhaps the most perfect ever written, so full of mystery, resignation, and peace:

> —— We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep ——

CHAPTER VII

IMAGINATION

WHEN Prometheus stole fire from Heaven at such expense he was thought to have done a handsome thing for humanity, who ever since have been able to cook their food and keep their bodies warm. Men were grateful for the sacrifice and blessing, and hailed Prometheus as a benefactor of the race. But had the myth grown round the heat that lights and warms the mind, and concocts crude fact into delicacies for the mental palate; had the Titan been figured as stealing from Heaven, not fire, but imagination, man must justly have felt himself under a still greater obligation. For consider the splendour of the gift. What Arabian magician ever had such a lamp as this? What, that the imagination can conceive, is as wonderful as the imagination itself, the miracle worker, the source of pleasure, and the consummate court-flatterer in the little kingdom of I? Give it a few stones, a few paints, a few words, and it shall, at its height, build a temple for the worship of God. It is the grand defiance to matter, the subverter of circumstances. At its lowest it is a pleasing cheat whom few have resolution enough to banish. It combines a variety of offices, but in one or other of them it is indispensable to man's happiness. A longing for decoration in the great bare

rooms of life is upon us from infancy, and the game of make-believe never ceases. To be able to throw out a window in the gaunt wall of fact blocking our view, and to feast upon the sunny prospect: though we are prisoners for life, this is a glorious thing, and reconciles us to captivity.

Shown first in child-play, nourished on fairy-tales, and in constant exercise over the wonders of life slowly unfolding before it, imagination nevertheless in the majority of cases retreats before the repeated attacks of experience, and takes refuge at length in day-dreams, its last citadel. But this happily is not the universal rule. There are people in whom the faculty is so dominant and imperious that, instead of dwindling with the years, it becomes stronger, using everything as its food and drawing nourishment even from the lifeless, like a tree. In their case the imagination does not turn inward, but outward; they do not dream and fashion merely of and for themselves, but of and for others as well. These are the blessed people who renew the stock of beauty, who bring us fresh water for our fading plants, and by shifting the old scenery give significance and charm again to things become too familiar. These, in a word, are the artists.

The artist, therefore, is one who, having preserved and strengthened his own imagination, is able to reinvigorate ours. He not only has visions enthralling to himself, but is able to reproduce their allurement, to a certain extent, for us. But to do this the artistic imagination has to see its visions from the point of view of its particular art, with the notion of reducing

them to the limits and conditions of its special medium; for through this medium the artist has to reproduce in us as much as possible of what he has seen and felt, since this is his only way of getting at our imaginations. And so, although a poet may have, more or less, the same visionary conception as a painter, yet since he has to represent it in words, not colours, he necessarily sees it in a different aspect and with different emphasis. He grasps more, too, than the painter, for his vision may appeal to the ear as well as the eye, may move and change instead of being stationary, his art allowing him this larger scope. Moreover, it allows him a chance of suggestion far beyond that of the plastic arts. A picture reduced to words leaves more room for the play of our fancy than any other kind of picture, because words are the least precise and limited of all mediums, and act at second hand instead of immediately on our senses. But the want of definiteness, in many ways a defect, is also a gain, since it enables what is given through the medium of words to point, as it were, beyond itself, to hint at the illimitable, and convey the mysterious; so that a poem becomes, not so much a picture gallery, as an invitation to the mind to wander in a shadowy garden, where it may find its dreams flitting in the moonlight.

The chief function of the poetic imagination is to give poetic truth; but besides this it has two important offices, make-believe and decoration, and I propose to deal with these in this chapter. But I must first say a word about invention, which is popularly supposed to be equivalent to imagination.

The two have, in reality, very little to do with each other. A very bad novel or drama may show a considerable amount of invention and yet may be totally devoid of imagination; its characters will be puppets, its atmosphere artificial, there will be no stir of the blood in it, no insight, no illusion; the most it can do is to interest by its machinery. And that is all that invention can provide. Many people can invent — "'t is as easy as lying"; but to make one's inventions plausible and probable, to make them alive, vivid, picturesque, needs imagination. And if, in addition, they be made beautiful and high and ideal, then alone can they be called works of the poetic imagination. Most of Shakespeare's plots —the instance is trite — were invented by others; and what was their value before he breathed life into them? Invention, in short, gives but raw material; it brings together general ideas not before connected, but leaves them bare and dead; the imagination it is, working upon these general ideas, which forces them back into living particularity, and weaves the glittering threads into an harmonious and beautiful tapestry. The difference between the two faculties is the difference between a map and a picture. But if it be insisted that invention is a part of imagination, let us at least dignify its name a little and call it no longer invention, but creation, in order that we may distinguish a practical faculty in the service of utility, from one that is wholly devoted to art.

I have called poetic truth, make-believe, and decoration the three main offices of the poetic imagination, and in considering them we must keep in

view their particular aims. Speaking broadly, what the three aim at is, first, to give ideal, characteristic, and suggestive pictures; and, second, to make the poet's ideas lucidly beautiful; and we have now to deal more particularly with these two aims. And first we have to see in what sense poetic pictures must be ideal.

It is a misfortune that there is no other adjective so well fitted for use here, because the words 'ideal' and 'real,' with the cognate abstractions 'idealism' and 'realism,' give but a slippery footing until they are defined. And so I must begin by explaining what I mean by 'ideal.' In one sense of the word all word pictures, and indeed all words, are ideal; first because they are symbols, and next because they can never give the whole of what they stand for. Try to picture any fact in words and you are at once forced to a selection. And it is here that the true opposition between ideal and real, as terms of art, arises. To oppose the real as matter of fact, as life, to the ideal as a representation of life by the selection of certain features, is to make a false antithesis which leads to confusion. When Mr. Bernard Shaw, for instance, talking of Shakespeare, says that real Antonys and Cleopatras may be found in every public-house, all he means is that men and women may be found there in a similar sexual relation to one another; which no one doubts. What he implies is that Shakespeare's ideal representation of Antony and Cleopatra may be found there, reduced to their lowest terms. But to take away the ideal elements from representations does not make them a whit more

real; it simply destroys them. Antony and Cleopatra, stripped of the high qualities that Shakespeare has given them, are no longer his Antony and Cleopatra, are nothing. A representation of two human beings living together in adultery may set them drinking in a public-house or sailing on a barge "burnished like a throne," and may work out their lives on those respective lines. Neither will be real in the sense of being actually alive; both may be real in the sense of being so treated as to appear probable or convincing; but the artistic method that with elaborate detail should describe a sordid pair in a pot-house will be 'real' as opposed to the 'ideal' artistic method that flashes a picture of a splendid couple on the famous barge. The one legitimate meaning of the expression "real Antonys and Cleopatras," with reference to Shakespeare, is that there are living people actually possessing the selected qualities of Shakespeare's hero and heroine, qualities which, it is pretty obvious, the ladies and gentlemen "to be found in every public-house" would be at some difficulty to furnish. Nor can realism claim to be nearer the truth of things than idealism, unless by the truth of things is meant the common appearance and surface connexions of phenomena which may be copied straight from nature into a note-book. But if by the truth of things is meant the height of their significance to us, their gift to the spirit rather than to the observation, their unity before their detail, it must be allowed that the truth is rather in idealism, in that principle of selection which, looking towards the bravery, romance, and glamour of life at its fullest

swell, tries to give essential pictures, than in that which prefers to elaborate the commonplace or carefully to accumulate details of the unessential.

However this may be, the poetic imagination gives pictures that are, in the sense described, ideal. But they are none the less concrete, none the less characteristic.

> The moon shines bright. — In such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus, methinks, mounted the Troyan walls
> And sighed his soul towards the Grecian tents
> Where Cressed lay that night ——

In this and the companion pictures of Thisbe, Dido, and Medea, Shakespeare in a lyrical passage gives us respectively the passion, mystery, pathos, and enchantment of a beautiful summer night as seen through the eyes of a pair of romantic young lovers. They are 'ideal' pictures, because by a few carefully chosen details they make us feel the whole charm and poetry of the night. Had they been 'real' pictures they would just as faithfully, on another principle of selection, have portrayed the night's prose. And in both cases the pictures would have been equally concrete. By this I mean that the prose of the night, as its poetry is here, would have been expressed in a form that appeals to our inward sense, and not, as abstractions do, merely to our intellect. And so these nocturnes, though ideal, are able to help produce in us that illusion of actuality on a higher plane than the commonly real, which is the feature of all make-believe. Or, as Goethe in his *Autobiography*

puts it, "The highest problem of any art is to produce by appearance the illusion of a higher reality; but it is a false endeavour to realize the appearance until at last only what is commonly real remains."

That the pictures given by the poet's imagination are vivid goes without saying, for a picture that is not vivid can hardly be called a picture at all. But some poets give us sharper outlines than others. Browning's pictures are always extraordinarily vivid. Consider this verse from *A Lover's Quarrel:*

> Fancy the Pampas' sheen!
> Miles and miles of gold and green
> Where the sun-flowers blow
> In a solid glow,
> And to break now and then the screen —
> Black neck and eyeballs keen,
> Up a wild horse leaps between!

You can almost see it. And it is wholly an ideal picture, bringing out, by a few masterly strokes, the space and colour and wildness that are latent in the idea of the Pampas. No note-book method of delineation, no copying of nature could have produced this impression. To copy nature is to try and take down in shorthand a long and detailed speech by one whose utterance is too speedy for the quickest writer; the result being a number of detached and disconnected phrases with hardly a consecutive sentence among them. True, what we have was really spoken; but all the meaning has gone out of it, or, worse still, is changed to a new and false meaning; whereas the imagination makes no attempt to take down everything, but tries in its own language to

give the gist of what it has heard. And this leads us to the explanation of what we mean by characteristic pictures, to give which is another "function of the poetic imagination."

The poet must know and see what he is aiming at; the haphazard fumbling of the amateur is not for him, but he must have his hand upon the essential character of the impression to be transferred to his readers, in order that he may fit it with an appropriate image, or display it in a satisfying picture. Vivid presentment answers to vital conception; the essential meaning of what is felt or thought, being once bare, can be suitably and becomingly clothed from the inexhaustible wardrobe of the imagination. But the character of what is to be represented, be it an invented or an actual scene, must be grasped, or else the image or picture, so to speak, misses fire; the illusion of a higher reality is lost, and the imagination, ceasing to be dramatic, has become at best merely decorative. To give character is to give the key-note to comprehension. If we have never seen the original of a really characteristic portrait, or known anything of it, we are yet able to say with conviction, This is a true likeness. But when the picture is of some perception or emotion or idea we have experienced for ourselves, then any representation that expresses the core of it will reproduce the whole for us; whereas, if the picture has missed the essential, we are not stimulated, the poet gets no help from us, and the effect is lost.

To make this clearer, consider these extracts from the *Poetical Sketches* of the youthful Blake, those

wonderful unpolished lines of genius, full of the attar of poetry, strong, original, direct, sprouting on all sides in their wild vigour, still untrained to the comely and decent growth of art; breaking out of metre here and there, and often crude, yet never strained, and always fiery with true inspiration. Blake, in his effort to pluck the fairest blossoms, sometimes with a rough hand tears the tree; but he generally gets his flower. The extracts are taken from the four poems to the seasons, and show very well what I mean by characteristic pictures. The first is from the invocation to Spring:

> O thou with dewy locks, who lookest down
> Through the clear window of the morning.

Next to Summer:

> ——Beside our springs
> Sit down, and in our mossy valley, on
> Some bank beside a river clear, throw thy
> Silk draperies off, and rush into the stream!

Then to Autumn:

> Thus sang the jolly Autumn as he sat;
> Then rose, girded himself, and o'er the bleak
> Hills fled from our sight; but left his golden load.

Last to Winter:

> Lo! now the direful monster, whose skin clings
> To his strong bones, strides o'er the groaning rocks.

These are examples of the clean seeing and vivid picturing of a true poet, the character of each season being firmly grasped and appropriately and fully imaged. The 'clear windows' of Spring, Summer throwing off silk draperies and rushing into the

stream, Autumn fleeing to the 'bleak hills' but leaving behind his 'golden load,' Winter's 'strong bones': no epithets and pictures could be happier, firmer, or more apt. Just in this way should we, had we the insight and imagination of the poet, express the sensation caused by the respective seasons; for these pictures but seem to put into adequate words what we have often vaguely felt. We are conscious in a dim way of the character of all we see or hear or feel, and when the poet, with his vital insight, seizes and images it for us, we recognize it at once and are delighted. This is so even when the character is given realistically, as in the song:

> When icicles hang by the wall
> And Dick the shepherd blows his nail.

But when the picture is ideal as well as characteristic, we get a double pleasure, from beauty as well as truth.

Besides being ideal and characteristic, an imaginative picture should be suggestive. It has to convey so much that it is bound to hint at more than it expresses. It must carry an atmosphere; it must not be conclusive, like twice two is four, but stimulating to the imagination. The true poet's vision is so intense that it burns away all that would obstruct it, and in a few words he can call up before us an image, concise in itself but so expansive in its suggestions that reams of paper might be filled with an account of them and yet leave them unexhausted. Such images flash upon us a whole train of circumstances not directly expressed. We are surrounded

with an environment which we inevitably make for ourselves out of what is given, and which therefore is more real to us than any description of it could be. The logic of imagination is appealed to, and the expected deduction follows from the premises, bringing forcibly before our minds what the poet had in his. In Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* Ione and Panthea have folded their wings over their eyes in horror of the approach of the Furies summoned to torment Prometheus:

Ione

Sister, I hear the thunder of new wings.

Panthea

—— their shadows make
The space within my plumes more black than night.

Could any detailed description equal in comprehensive effect the suggestions of these few words: a storm sweeping up, a huge, resounding thunder-cloud of evil things, empowered and rapacious for torture, blackening the scene in their swarm; the horror, the vehemence, the crescendo of it all; its contrast with the peaceful attitudes of the two sisters; the far and heavy wings of the Furies, the near light plumes of Panthea: all this, and far more, is inevitably present in the few words quoted. And, moreover, like the painter who, instead of depicting the lined and drawn anguish of Agamemnon at the sacrifice of Iphigenia, showed the bystanders with various expressions of grief, but covered the father's face, Shelley here, by merely representing the effect of its sound and shadow on the sisters, has made the flight of the hell hounds

a thousand times more vivid and terrible to us. For he leaves us free to range in the horrible and awful, and our imaginings in an atmosphere of vague terrors are a thousand times more thrilling than any realization of one of them could be. Even taken from its context this passage is most effective; read, as it should be in its place, with the due preparation of mind and feeling secured by what precedes, it is magical.

And now, having shown in what way the poetic imagination makes its pictures ideal, characteristic, and suggestive, so giving room for charm, truth, and mystery, let us consider in what way it makes the poet's ideas lucidly beautiful; for this, as will be remembered, was stated to be its second aim.

This second part of the imagination — the decorative — does not try to produce the illusion of a higher reality by means of pictures. Its function is rather to give warmth and colour to the poet's perceptions and thoughts, and to help preserve the tone of his feeling; and it does this by calling in the aid of similes, metaphors, and analogues, or, in a word, of likeness. The poet wants to make his meaning and his feeling as near and clear to us as is compatible with beauty or grace, and figurative language can accomplish this better than bald statements, because it substitutes words of vivid significance for trite and colourless words, and illumines one fact by the associations of another. By means of a figure two ideas, before disconnected, are now joined in our minds; the resemblance between them is seen or felt with pleasure, and, since the difference is obvious, the particular

points in which the two agree are thus emphasized and brought home to us. The likeness is not insisted on, but it must be near enough to awaken interest and to stir the imagination. It is as if, the common avenues of our understanding being crowded with prosaic words, the poet slips round to gain admittance by another door; and by likening one thing to another (simile), or giving one thing in terms of another (metaphor), or by striking in some way a parallel between them (analogue), he both wins an audience and illumines and adorns his idea. He illumines it by the translation into other ideas with which it has more or less in common; he adorns it by joining to it the associations connected with these fresh ideas. For the resemblances suggested to the poetic fervour by a thing are always such as dignify, refresh, or enrich it; not — as is the case with the humorous mind — such as provoke laughter by their unexpectedness or extravagance, nor — as happens with followers of the "Art of Sinking" — such as degrade instead of elevating the original. By this kind of reflection of one idea on another the poet focuses light upon the particular aspect of his subject that he wishes to bring out, keeps it on the high plane of feeling, and embellishes it. Much of the natural beauty of things round us, much of their meaning, is, as every one knows, lost to us by familiarity. But they regain their power to move us, when they are shown, as imagination shows them, swept of the dust of habit, to minds excited by the energy and emotion of poetry. Because the poet feels so freshly what is perhaps stale to us he makes us feel too; and the

resemblances suggested to him by his imagination under the influence of feeling carry this freshness with them and impart it to us. And this harmony between feeling and imagination is important; for when it is absent, when the imagination is working but for itself, the result may be ornamental, but it will not be illuminative. We may admire the wit, the ingenuity, the elegance of the illustration, but it will not 'purge with euphrasy and rue the visual nerve,' and let us look through the bandage of experience at a new and glorious world. For this kind of imagination, which is called fancy, does not strive to realize the truth and beauty of things by an image, or to get at the essence of a thought and picture it. It wishes to please, and it tries to do so by a display of embroidery and jewellery, regardless as to whether or not they set off the subject. The subject only interests as being something to hang finery on. And whereas the flowers of imagination bud naturally from the stem of thought, and are sober or rich according to the nature of the plant, fancy will twine a rose on a nettle, or, worse still, clasp the lily with a diamond buckle. And it is well if the rose be not artificial or the diamond paste, for then we may overlook the incongruity and take pleasure in the flower or the jewel for its own sake. But too often this kind of wit or ingenuity is satisfied with glitter and show and gives us such verse as this of Marvell's, which pictures his mistress sitting.

—— afloat
Like Venus in her pearly boat;
The halcyons, calming all that's nigh,

Betwixt the air and water fly;
Or if some rolling wave appears,
A mass of ambergris it bears;
Nor blows more wind than what may well
Convoy the perfume to the smell.

Since the aim of the decorative imagination is to make the poet's thoughts and perceptions lucidly beautiful, the resemblance he uses must not be too far-fetched, nor too heavy, nor unintelligible to readers of ordinary culture, for this occasions obscurity. Nor should they be hackneyed, or they will fail to arouse interest. But they should be appropriate, freshly felt, and full developed; and as to this we cannot do better in judging any example than bear in mind the axiom of Keats: "The rise, the setting, the progress of imagery should, like the sun, come natural to him [the reader], shine over him, and set soberly, although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight." Nor has any poet taken this axiom more to heart, or put it in practice with finer effect, than Keats himself:

As when upon a tranced summer night
Those green-robed senators of mighty woods,
Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,
Dream, and so dream all night without a stir,
Save for one gradual solitary gust
Which comes upon the silence, and dies off,
As if the ebbing air had but one wave:
So came these words and went ——

The imagery here is carried through, that is to say, the image has been seen, felt, and thoroughly expressed; all the poetry in it has been brought out;

and we are left with a feeling of satisfaction, quite independent of the beauty of the representation, in the cleanness of the work. For poets sometimes, through press of thought or because their art is not ripe, make too little or too much of their imagery, which thus produces but a sketchy result. Or sometimes the visionary conception is vague, which makes the execution inconclusive. But here the vision is sure and full, and the strokes, that picture it, firm; we are not left halfway or taken beyond the mark, but find ourselves at the exact spot the poet would have us.

And we may now sum up the work of the imagination in poetry. It gives ideal truth by gathering together the threads of feeling and intuition that connect the universe into one spiritual whole. It gives body, colour, and warmth to perceptions, feelings, and ideas. It illustrates, characterizes, and decorates. It not only creates, but reveals, inventing something new and re-casting what is old. Everything it touches it makes interesting, even the commonplace, for it is full of clinging tendrils that clasp the mind and force it to a fresh regard. Its great qualities are to be vivid, beautiful, lucid, and vital. Whether it dive down into the past or forecast the future it brings up life from the dead. It can cast a spell upon fact as easily as it can weave a web, out of gossamer thoughts spun from itself, which shall swing as free as possible from all contact with earth. What is wrought upon by it is brought into relation with what we feel deeply, and so the frigid is made warm, and what is without is brought within. And,

lastly, its pictures and imagery are always in the service of what is high; for it gives shape and habitation, not alone to 'airy nothings,' but to all healthy, natural human passions and desires, to all noble and generous aspirations, and to that 'inborn beauty' which flits beyond the reach of less gifted minds.

CHAPTER VIII

BEAUTY

BEAUTY has a philosophy and a cult. It is reasoned about in Aesthetics and it is enshrined by Art. And, like most high things, it has to pay the penalty of its station by having its name misused and made common. In ordinary speech everything that pleases is called beautiful, without discrimination. We hear of 'a beautiful game,' 'a beautiful problem,' 'a beautiful trick,' and so on, though it is obvious that this is not quite the right adjective. What is meant is something more like skilful, neat, clever, etc. Still, the word has a remote appropriateness, because the perfect adaptation of means to a given end is what invites applause, and this is one of the constituents of beauty. But the end proposed in such case is in itself something other than beauty — generally the loosening of some more or less intricate knot — and the result is only beautiful incidentally, which prevents the word from being properly applicable.

Nature, again, is called beautiful, and few would deny her such praise. Yet here, too, we must discriminate. The beauties of nature are fortuitous and, in one sense, superfluous. The animal and vegetable worlds are engaged in the struggle for existence, and their colours and forms which alone

are beautiful to us, are the direct outcome of this struggle; while the mineral world follows the geologic laws without regard to their effect on man's aesthetic sense. There are other things in the world of greater importance than beauty, and nature plods her way careless of man's distinctions, making equal use of the ugly and the beautiful, the wicked and the good. And this is what I mean by calling her beauties fortuitous and superfluous. Nor do we get from her exactly the same feeling as we get from art, though, for want of words, we describe the two feelings by the same term beautiful. We cannot isolate the beauty of nature, since we ourselves are nature's products, living in her world, under her influence, subject to her laws. Her beauties are consequently more intimate, less unadulterated than art's, which are aloof from us as natural beings, and being specially designed need a certain preparation. Nature's beauties, too, are more melancholy, for they are, as it were, the smile on the face of change. The flower withers, the pretty girl grows old, the mountain, to-day so beautiful, to-morrow is grey and grim, and the happy valley of our youth is now a thicket of chimneys, breathing black smoke. And we know that we also are changing, are growing old. But art is an arrest of youth and beauty. It lifts us out of time and space, and fulfils the longing for the imperishable. And so, unconsciously perhaps, we stand before the beauty of art with other feelings, expecting perfection, not astonished by it, demanding joy even in the representation of grief, and looking for such a rearrangement of appearance as will be

more easily permeated by the beauty welling up from the primal source of all things. For beauty does not originate in art, or nature, or even in the soul of man, but these are mere channels of its flow; and all that man can do is, by what he calls art, to remove, as far as permitted to him, such obstructions as nature and his own short-sightedness oppose to the sweet and purifying stream.

Conscious selection and arrangement of material in accordance with an inner principle and standard of beauty distinguish the beauties of art from those of nature, and from the so-called beauties of skill that do not gratify the aesthetic sense but rather our taste for machinery. The form taken by selection and arrangement differs of course with the medium used. But orderly form, a web of some kind, is essential, because it is only through such that beauty can be revealed. These forms, though confined to certain limits, cannot be irrevocably fixed. Periods recur in which the beauty of a given art seems bound for ever to one individual form. And perhaps the next generation will break this mould and cast another. In music this has repeatedly happened; and in poetry, no less, certain set forms have at different times seemed essential to beauty. Art occasionally degenerates into artifice, which sets up its own narrow by-laws as the laws of the realm, and wields a little tyranny, until successfully appealed against by genius. What abuse has not Shakespeare received in France for not observing the 'Unities,' and what dramatist to-day cares twopence about them? And in Pope's time smoothness of versifica-

tion and epigrammatic common sense were the high-roads to success, while a 'poetic' syntax and 'poetic' themes were held as indispensable to poetry, as high birth to a gentleman, until Wordsworth finally showed that beauty may be found in any dress, and that she is the beggar maid as well as Cophetua's Queen.

But however impossible it may be to fix individual forms inside each particular form of art, those particular forms of art themselves never, of course, vary. Their medium, that is, is always the same. And this medium, through which beauty shines, is, previous to being worked up by the artist, neither beautiful nor ugly, but neutral.

And here an objection may be raised. The medium of poetry is words, and I said in my first chapter that certain words were in themselves beautiful. Is not this contradiction? And many paints are beautiful in themselves, and colours are the materials of painting. How, then, can words and colours be neutral? And the answer is, They are neutral from the point of view of art, which consists in the selection and arrangement of them as given. They may have a natural beauty, but this can be destroyed or intensified by conjunction. A haphazard collection of beautiful words will not make a beautiful poem, nor can one produce a satisfactory picture by merely streaking a canvas with pretty colours. The reason, therefore, that I called the material of all arts neutral was that its effect depends entirely upon its setting.

The beauty of an artistic production, then, is made out of neutral materials which become beautiful

by selection and arrangement. But what is it controls this selection and arrangement? It must be made on some principle. The artist must be aiming at something. True, and what he is aiming at is the realization of his idea or theme, the beauty of which is either taken from art, or given by nature, or wrought by imagination. However it be obtained, the theme at first floats loosely in the poet's mind, gradually gathering beauty and significance and becoming more and more concrete, until at last it is ripe to receive the embodiment of form. Its beauty in that first state was ideal and perfect; because it was independent of the vehicle of transmission, which is both fixed and finite, whereas the idea is flowing and unconfined. Nevertheless, the beauty inherent in the idea, the theme, the whole, may so raise the neutral material of form as to make a beautiful unity, and a beautiful unity is the aim of every artist.

Owing, however, to this difference between idea and form, even when he has fixed his beautiful theme and chosen his art, difficulties of execution begin to crowd on the artist. As we are dealing with poetry, let us consider what the poet has to do to make his reader feel something of the beauty that has moved him to verse. We must remember that however beautiful his idea may be, unless his treatment of it preserves as much of its beauty as possible, it will be utterly lost. What comes into the head as beautiful may but too easily go out as ugly. And no one bewails the change, for no one knows it, except, perhaps, the poet.

To show how dependent a beautiful theme is on

its treatment, I will give two renderings of the legend of Persephone for comparison. The first is Milton's:

> Not that field
> Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers,
> Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
> Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world.

These few lines retain the essential beauty of the legend. Contrast with them these dozen lines from the poet Darwin. In spite of the fact that he had his Milton before him as he wrote, he manages to blot out most of the charm of the theme:

> Sudden, unseen amid the twilight shade,
> Rushed gloomy Dis and seized the trembling maid.
> Her startling damsels sprung from mossy seats,
> Dropped from their gauzy laps the gathered sweets,
> Clung round the struggling nymph, with piercing cries
> Pursued the chariot and invoked the skies; —
> Pleased as he grasps her in his iron arms,
> Frights with soft sighs, with tender words alarms;
> The wheels descending rolled in smoky rings,
> Infernal Cupids flapped their demon wings;
> Earth with deep yawn received the fair amazed,
> And far in night celestial beauty blazed.

We see here that the possession of a beautiful theme no more constitutes an artist than the possession of wood makes a carpenter. Execution, the working out of the theme, is the test of poetry as of all art. And it may be noted, by the way, that when beauty is the end proposed, execution is more difficult than when the aim is at significance, for the one is more easily lost in the process than the other, and beauty is more sensitive to handling than truth.

But execution is dependent on the poet's susceptibility to beauty of idea as well as to beauty of form. If Darwin had had a higher idea of beauty he would not have allowed these lines to represent it.

The indefinite idea of beauty that I spoke of above was of course the idea of the whole work of art. In execution the floating theme becomes fixed and has to be transferred by means of parts. Those parts are in poetry, words, metre, rhythm, imagery, etc. So that, speaking generally, we may say that a beautiful poem is one that speaks to us as a whole through the harmony of musical words, lofty and essential images, and glorious ideas, carried by suitable rhythm and metre, and inspired by intense feeling that aims at embodying itself in a fitting form. It is therefore impossible to analyse the beauty of the whole by the analysis of its parts, because of the interaction of those parts. Each of the elements is not only beautiful in itself but is made more beautiful by each of the others. But without attempting an impossible task we may make a few general reflections. Let us start by examining a stanza from Keats's poem *On a Grecian Urn:*

> Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
> To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
> Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
> And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
> What little town by river or sea-shore,
> Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
> Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

I need not stop to point out the beauty of the words, rhythm, and metre; but I would draw attention, first, to the easy handling of the general meaning of the verse, the unfolding, progression, and finish of the main thought. Nothing is hurried or slurred; each step leads gracefully and naturally to the next, and the foot is firmly, though lightly, planted. The effect of this logical development and proportion of parts is not so obvious to us as that from the words, metre, and rhythm, but it is no less important to the beauty of the whole.

Next, I would have the reader observe the beauty of the individual images, their harmony with each other, and the way they help the general impression. The 'green altar,' the 'heifer, with silken flanks, lowing at the skies,' the 'little town,' 'mountain-built,' 'with peaceful citadel' are so many beautiful images making up a beautiful whole. But why do we call these images beautiful? And why do we refuse the term to the image of 'infernal Cupids flapping their demon wings'? The reason, I think, is this: an image is beautiful when it recalls to us a peculiar pleasure that we have felt from certain sensations and ideas actually experienced. We all know that the pleasure derived from anticipation and recollection is nearly always greater than that obtained from realization. It is because the thought of the pleasure in front or behind is a kind of sifted pleasure, free from all elements of discomfort, weariness, or even pain, which so generally attend and mix with the reality. In the same way the pleasure obtained from actual sensations and thoughts pro-

duced by the beauty of nature is, when brought back again to us by poetry, intensified by having been strained through the imagination and thus presented to us as a complete whole free from discordant elements. If to this be added the pleasure of beautiful language, metre, and rhythm, it is easily seen how it is that images may appear more beautiful to us in poetry than they would if actually experienced. A beautiful image thus starts a train of associations connected with beautiful experience, and by allowing nothing discordant conjures up a picture that gives us double or treble pleasure. If we apply this to Darwin's image of "infernal Cupids flapping their demon wings," we find that the reason we do not get from it the peculiar pleasure we get from beauty is that the associations it rouses are discordant, and the experiences recalled from nature are anything but beautiful. Flapping wings are suggestive of poultry; infernal Cupids bring together discordant ideas; and since, as far as I know, demons have the same kind of wings as angels, the phrase 'demon wings' can only mean black wings. Try and put the pieces together and they do not fit; and the elements being heterogeneous it is impossible to rest in the whole. In so far as the picture is incongruous we cannot realize it; it is ridiculous in as far as we can. But Keats's images, on the contrary, give harmonious, complete, and enchanting pictures, each with its attendant train of pleasing associations. Who can describe all the beautiful associations excited by that picture of a 'little town mountain-built with peaceful citadel,' what picture could be

more complete than that of the 'heifer lowing at the skies,' more enchanting than the 'green altar'? But I need not deal with each image. Enough has been suggested, I think, to show why it is they all give such pleasure, both individually and in connexion.

There are other beauties besides those I have touched on. Consider the last three lines of the stanza:

> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

It is the thought here, not to speak of its expression, that gives us pleasure. There is a kind of playful melancholy about it. We know there is a double illusion, that the 'flowery tale' is first imaginatively treated by the artist of the urn, and then his imaginations are imaginatively treated by the poet; and yet in spite of this knowledge our sympathies are so prettily attracted by the thought of the 'desolate little town,' which can never know why it has been left for ever to silence, that they are half given; the result being wholly pleasurable.

The poem is full of beautiful words, associations, images, and thoughts, unfolding gracefully and logically, harmonious in matter and manner and emotion. We read it and are thrilled by it, and perhaps may wonder what magical alchemy it is which can transmute that dull urn we glanced at so indifferently the other day at the museum into a thing of such imperishable loveliness. And we may conclude from this that there is nothing so dull,

trivial, or even forbidding which, dropped into the ocean of a poet's mind, may not "suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange"; and that the beauty of a poem, though dependent on form, is only an irradiation of form by the beauty of idea, which, take up its lodgings where it pleases, will always try and make its quarters beautiful too.

We see, then, that the pleasure given us by a beautiful poem is partly sensuous, partly intellectual, partly spiritual. It is sensuous through the appeal of form and imagery, intellectual through the appeal of thought and the harmony of the parts with the whole, and spiritual through the appeal to our sense of oneness. We may say this, and a great deal more to the same effect, but of course it is no explanation of the reason why some ideas and sensations should give us the peculiar pleasure we associate with beauty. That is inexplicable. We only know that certain arrangements of words, etc., do produce this pleasure, and that other arrangements fail to produce it. I am only trying to show that there are particular factors present in all poetic beauty; no one can say why the disposition of these factors in one way should produce the required effect, in another way miss it. Nor can anyone explain why beauty always has a halo.

But here is another factor which goes to make up the whole sum of beauty. Beauty, we may take for granted, is always freshly felt by the poet; otherwise he would not be moved by it to write. But it is one thing to feel beauty freshly, quite a different thing to represent it freshly; and this freshness of representation is the additional factor I mean. One

of the many debts we owe to Wordsworth is his fresh treatment of natural beauty. This treatment is often called simplicity, but that term is an unfortunate one. Simplicity gives the impression of something opposed to art. But simplicity in his case means without artifice of style, that is, without any conscious deviation from the grammatical structure of prose. But it means, too, that his impressions were given in the language that seemed to him to convey them most clearly, regardless of whether his words were in themselves prosaic or not. By this he often succeeded in giving a freshness of representation that he would have missed altogether by using the hackneyed poetical formulae so common in the eighteenth-century poets. His language as a whole certainly cannot be called simple, unless this and many similar passages are simple:

> In his stern father's hearing, Vaudracour
> Persisted openly that death alone
> Should abrogate his human privilege
> Divine, of swearing everlasting truth,
> Upon the altar, to the Maid he loved.

His simplicity consists in the choice of subject and in an absence of exaggeration and affectation in its treatment, not an absence of pomposity. But let us give a more favourable quotation. Take, for instance, this beautiful stanza from his *Yarrow Visited:*

> But thou, that did'st appear so fair
> To fond imagination,
> Dost rival in the light of day
> Her delicate creation:

Meek loveliness is round thee spread,
A softness still and holy;
The grace of forest charms decayed,
And pastoral melancholy.

If this is simple language, then we must not confine its use to Wordsworth, for it is language which Shelley, Keats, or Tennyson might have used. Or when he says, let

The swan on still St. Mary's Lake
Float double, swan and shadow!

Is that a simple picture? Yes, simple in the sense that the picture of the 'heifer lowing at the skies' or the 'mountain-built with peaceful citadel' is simple: a simplicity of effect due to the cunning of art. The great merit of Wordsworth does not lie in his so-called simplicity, but in his recognition and exemplification of the fact that beauty is independent — not of form, but — of any special form; in particular of that special form to which the ears of his contemporaries had become so used that they were in danger of thinking form was of more importance than idea, and might even be independent of it. He restored the idea to dignity by stripping it of all that in his opinion was tawdry theatrical finery, and by dressing it instead in honest homespun. But it is worth while noticing, lest we be misled by metaphor, that homespun may be cloth of gold as well as Harris tweed, that art goes to the making of both, and that honesty is independent of material. And it may be noticed further that when Wordsworth, as in too many of his poems he did, mistook honesty of treatment for beauty of idea, or became careless

whether his homespun fitted or not, he too failed as badly, from the point of view of beauty, as those who used, what he calls in some of his prefaces, 'mechanical devices of style.'

The necessity for freshness of treatment is but another phase of the eternal struggle that has to be gone through by every poet before he can become worthy of the name. This is the struggle to look at his ideas from the objective point of view, and to realize the effect they will produce on strangers, who are nevertheless of one flesh and blood and language with himself. He may take impressions peculiar to himself, but he must express them by touching those associations that are common to all whom he would move. Otherwise, he is but writing in an illegible hand. And he cannot complain because he is not understood; for it is his business to make himself understood. And a poet will never be understood as long as his impressions are given in language and imagery from which all the life has gone by constant use. His difficulty is that such language and imagery did once give the required impression, and the very reason they are hackneyed is that they were originally most fit for their purpose. But ideas, images, and combinations of words are inexhaustible, and he who takes no trouble, or has no power, to give his reader new ones, must suffer the neglect by which the world protects itself from the incompetent.

Beauty is like sunshine, always welcome in itself whether it light up the hovel or the palace, the grimy alley or the broad fields. When the sun is on it, a piece of glass is as beautiful as a diamond, and

were it possible to look simply at the beauty of a poem without considering its substance, the beauty of poetry would be found equally in what was intrinsically worthless, as well as in what was intrinsically valuable. But poetic beauty has significance as well as charm. A poet's words are at once symbols of thought, notes of sound, and steps in a dance, and their selection and arrangement depend on their ability to serve this triple purpose. Music and dreams, walking different roads, meet and reflect each other's glory in a beautiful poem. And at the heart of every dream lies a thought. Suppose, then, this thought, or even the whole dream, is at variance with the charm of the music. Will the poem cease thereby to be beautiful? And the answer is plainly in the negative, but with a qualification. Perfect beauty always suggests a perfect fitness of means to an end. This is part of the peculiar pleasure it gives us. If this is missing, if there is waste or want in the means, we are deprived of our full satisfaction; and we call the result less beautiful than one which gives us this full satisfaction. Since these thoughts and dreams are part of the means by which poetry produces its effects, if, then, significance is at variance with the charm of their expression, there is not a perfect fitness between the means and the end, and we do not get the full satisfaction we should have had if the subject-matter had been as charming as the treatment. To this it may be objected that beauty is wholly a matter of form and treatment, that these are independent of subject-matter, and that since beauty is the end proposed there is a

perfect fitness of means to end. Or it may be agreed that, though the subject-matter would be unpleasing by and in itself, it is made pleasing by being presented in a beautiful form. But, as explained above, the beauty of form takes a fresh beauty from the irradiation through it of a beautiful idea, so that though the form be beautiful in itself it loses its full complement of beauty when it is at variance with the subject-matter, and such a poem cannot therefore be called as beautiful as one where theme and treatment are happily married. And to say that unpleasant or ugly subject-matter may be made pleasant and beautiful by treatment does not affect our argument at all. If it can be, well and good; its essential character has been changed and so is taken outside the contention, which was that unpleasant or ugly subject-matter detracts from the pleasure and beauty of poetry. But if the treatment does not change its character, then it still remains ugly and unpleasant. Let us take an extreme instance. The subject-matter of a few of Herrick's poems it is not too strong to call nauseous. One or two of these, however, are treated with his usual beauty of words and style, and with images in themselves beautiful. But will anyone assert that the subject-matter has, on account of beauty of form and treatment, ceased to be disgusting? No one, I think, who has read the poems in question. It is more possible, on the contrary, that he will think an offensive subject-matter a double offence by being brought into close contact with beautiful words and images, since it is heightened by the contrast.

It is on the question of subject-matter that opinions mostly differ because tastes are not the same; so that a matter that gives pleasure to one man may give offence to another. In the end the appeal must be to the cultivated, sound-hearted man with a healthy mind and an artistic sense. Such a man will not mistake what is merely unconventional, naïve, and unsectarian for what is immoral, licentious, and blasphemous. He will not renounce Shelley and all his works on the ground that he was an atheist, nor decline to read Coleridge because he was an opium-drinker, whereby his poetry must necessarily be immoral, or Keats because he was a consumptive and his poetry therefore must be unhealthy. But he will turn from what remains gross or hateful however beautifully it may be treated, just as he will turn from what is feeble or mawkish however respectable. In short, as far as poetry is concerned he will turn from vice in a beautiful dress and from virtue in an ugly one; for he will hate the Philistine as well as the depraved. And the interpretation he will give the terms vice and virtue, in poetry, will make them practically equivalent to what is morbid and what is healthy, what is rancid and what is clean.

A subject that is taken from life or — to use Matthew Arnold's fine expression — a subject-matter that we can 'rest in,' will give more pleasure in the long run than one which is too unsubstantial to stand the test of time.

Finding no impulses in the world around him, no prompting from life, the poet allows his imagination

to spin for itself a web of beauty from gossamer dreams of its own, and float as free as it can from all connexion with earth. Upon this creation he lavishes all his wealth of fancy and resource, and the result is as gorgeous and charming as cloud scenery of snowy Alps and purple valleys touched with fire. We enter the delectable land, so far removed from our daily lives, so still, so ethereal, with delight; and this, we cry, is the true realm of poetry. We become Lotus-eaters, forgetful of kindred and home, forgetful of strife and competition, of sorrow and evil. And he would indeed be an ingrate who, once having tasted such food with exquisite pleasure, should later cry out against it on the score that it was not nutritious. Such poems, written with joy, are read with joy by those for whom they were meant. And if we no longer get joy from them it shows that they are no longer meant for us, that we have in some sort deteriorated. Though they may cease as we grow older to give that fullness of enjoyment they once gave, though they cannot satisfy all our demands as they used, we may still love them for their music and rapture, still turn to them for relief when 'the world is too much with us.' Nevertheless this letting loose of the imagination to hover, like the fabulous birds of Paradise, ever on the wing without alighting, is an easier thing for a poet than to exercise it upon experience and, by subliming and transforming fact, to open our eyes to the glories of the world we live in; just as it is easier for the playwright to expand in epigram than to make his dramatis personae natural and characteristic. It is easier,

and it is also less valuable for us. Such poems are but the apotheosis of our day-dreams. They gild an uninhabitable world. Having no substance of reality, their effect is limited to the hour we pass with them. With the shutting of a book a spell is snapped; we have dreamt, now we must take up our real lives again, for there is no connexion between the one and the other. But where poetry is the illumination of fact instead of fancy, where it rests upon earth and man's joys and griefs, instead of beating its wings in the void, there poetry comes into our real lives, and is valued both as a sedative and a tonic. Here are no vaporous day-dreams, which but strike a more trenchant contrast between imagination and reality, but something that strips the veil of custom from our eyes and shows us the world as it looks to a high and noble spirit, who shares our pains and pleasures without being entangled in them, and who sees and feels, besides, the beauty and wonder of a thousand sights and sensations to which, but for him, we should have been dull and blind. The reading of poetry like this is a fresh reading of earth, from which we rise with no sense of antagonism between the book and the fact, but with natures enlarged and strengthened for an appreciation of what is beautiful and moving, and a sympathy for what is strong and significant, around us.

The knights of old retired, when wounded, to a hermitage deep in woodland peace, there to forget their jousts and tourneys and give themselves to holy meditation; and when their wounds were healed they would joyfully swing themselves home in the saddle again and prick forth with shining lances,

athirst once more for the joys of battle. Now there are singers of the hermitage and singers of the battle, or, to pass from the simile which is none too exact, there is the singer of the ideal world and the singer of the real, and we cannot dispense with either, for both give us beauty, and by giving us beauty bring us too, at the same time, consolation for what is sordid, ugly, and painful in life. "Keats," said Carlyle, "wanted a world of treacle"; and we have the picture of a bear clawing at a butterfly. But Carlyle's caricatures, thrown out in conversation or in letters, however false in their grotesque exaggeration of some particular feature, have nevertheless, like all caricatures, a basis of truth. It is not true, it is grotesquely false, to say that Keats wanted a world of nothing but cloying sweetness; but it is true that in the majority of his poems he sought refuge from the depressing circumstances of his life in a world of ideal beauty, and, finding comfort therein, identified beauty and truth. But no one who has read his letters and poems will think that his real attitude to life was a cowering one. He knew well enough that the yearning for ideal beauty was not the true way out of the difficulties of life, and that he would, if he lived, have to meet these difficulties on their own ground. He saw too that his art would have to take account of reality, and no one can doubt that he was girding himself for the struggle when he died. Between a world where there is nothing

> More boisterous than a lover's bended knee

and a world where

> A sense of real things comes doubly strong

he has a vision of a world of

> — nobler life
> Where I may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts.

But he sees that to realize this world will mean a long and bitter task for him, and many a time his heart fails him. He knew his own weakness — no man better — and he knew his strength; nor can we doubt that he would have accomplished his task had he been spared. There are plain indications in his last poems that his idealism is condensing like a beautiful dew upon fact. *The Eve of St. Mark*, unfinished at his death, begins thus:

> Upon a Sabbath-day it fell;
> Twice holy was the Sabbath-bell,
> That called the folk to evening prayer;
> The city streets were clean and fair
> From wholesome drench of April rains;
> And, on the western window panes,
> The chilly sunset faintly told
> Of unmatured green, valleys cold,
> Of the green thorny bloomless hedge,
> Of rivers new with spring-tide sedge,
> Of primroses by sheltered rills,
> And daisies on the aguish hills.

We have but to compare these lines with the following, taken from one of his earlier poems, to see how he had progressed:

> The evening weather was so bright, and clear,
> That men of health were of unusual cheer;
> Stepping like Homer at the trumpet's call,
> Or young Apollo on the pedestal:
> And lovely women were as fair and warm
> As Venus looking sideways in alarm.

The images here, though beautiful in themselves, are beautiful merely for themselves; they do not reflect beauty on the objects; we have a picture of Homer, Apollo, and Venus, not of men and women. In other words, the poet is still at the subjective stage of art, whereas in the *Eve of St. Mark* he was rapidly approaching the objective stage when the poet still has his fresh sense of beauty, but, instead of using emotions, sensations, and perceptions as a starting-point for beauty to run from, he sees them as a goal for beauty to run to. And this change from the subjective to the objective is a long way in the direction of 'a criticism of life.' But, as he writes to Reynolds three years before his death:

> My flag is not unfurled
> On the Admiral-staff, — and to philosophise
> I dare not yet!

No one who loved poetry would willingly part with any of its beauty, whether ideal or real. And, at any rate while one is young, the pleasure from the one may be as great as that from the other, in certain moods. But as we get older there comes at times an impatience with poems 'snatched out of the air,' for they recall the illusions of our youth without recalling youth's belief, and we have learnt to regard those illusions as false because they represent but one side of things — the ideal side, which must be false until re-read in the light of the real. We cannot 'rest in' these ideal pictures; for they are pictures neither of what is or has been, nor of what ought to be; they are pictures of undesirable impossibilities, enjoyable

only for their form and as a temporary respite from exhaustion.

> Ah love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
> To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
> Would we not shatter it to bits — and then
> Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's desire!

So sings old Omar through the lips of FitzGerald, giving utterance to the cry of 'the everlasting no.' The cry is beautiful and human, and therefore real in the best sense of the word — 'a criticism of life' as old and lasting as the hills. It gives pleasure because it is the beautiful expression of a perpetually recurring desire. It is the real cry for ideal beauty, not a beautiful picture of an ideal world. Compare it with the first stanza of Rossetti's poem, *The Blessed Damozel*, and you will see the difference I mean:

> The blessed damozel leaned out
> From the gold bar of Heaven;
> Her eyes were deeper than the depth
> Of water stilled at even;
> She had three lilies in her hand,
> And the stars in her hair were seven.

The beauty of these lines and of the whole poem is apparent, and no one can read it without receiving great pleasure. But it is not free from a taint of sickliness. It suggests a tall wax candle burning in the dim light of a recessed chapel before a rich shrine. You go in from the free air and sunlight, the movement and the noise of life, and the quiet, the gloom, and the heavy scents have their effect upon you; but you are not sorry to come out again and fill your lungs with fresh air, and maybe to picture to yourself

a temple of peace that is not stagnation, a temple whose columns are trees, with green fields for aisles and the heavens for a roof, a temple whose congregation is all living things and whose high priest is nature.

Beauty, then, in whatever companionship we find it, is always a delight in itself. But in poetry beauty of form can never be separated from significance, and the higher, wider, and truer the significance the more beauty and charm we shall find in the poem. And we may close this chapter with some lines from that poet who above all others wrought the world into shapes of beauty without losing a jot of its significance:

> O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
> By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!
> The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
> For that sweet odour which doth in it live.
> The canker-blooms have full as deep a dye
> As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
> Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly
> When summer's breath their masked buds discloses.
> But, for their virtue only is their show,
> They live unwooed and unrespected fade;
> Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
> Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made:
> And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
> When that shall fade, by verse distils your truth.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

WE read, or should read, poetry for pleasure. But in order to get the utmost pleasure from what we read, we have to bend the best powers of our mind upon it, and, with a mood attuned to the finer emotions, throw our whole strength into partnership with the poet.

A lounging mental attitude or a dulled sensibility is an affront to thoughtful and beautiful work; and besides, to take up a book for pleasure and yet to read it in such a way as to reduce pleasure to a minimum is to stultify ourselves. And yet it is a curious fact that a man who will spend hours examining a piece of architecture, or studying a picture, or tracing the harmonies of a musical composition, will consider that he has exhausted the possibilities of delight in a poem when he has read it through once. On the strength or weakness of the general impression he takes from this cursory perusal he is ready with his verdict, and will praise or condemn without compunction, though he might be the first to gird at such summary procedure if applied to the other arts. But more than this: no natural aptitude, no preparation, no study, no experience, nor trained judgment based on artistic knowledge, is thought necessary for the full enjoyment of poetry; it never seems to occur to people

that any thing of the sort is wanted. They are modest enough in the presence of other arts, but their attitude towards literature is almost invariably one of unconscious arrogance. It is plain they do not recognize its difficulties or appreciate its successes; do not indeed consider that the difficulties exist; or they would take a fine poem or essay less as a matter of course and more as a matter of art. When really stirred by a poem their word of praise is, 'What inspiration!' without considering for a moment what is meant by this expression. But if they are pressed on the point it is found that by an inspired poem they mean one furnished ready-made to the poet by some supernatural agency or other; they picture him as suddenly seized by divine frenzy, like the Cumaean Sibyl, and pouring out verse over which he has no more control than a decanter over the wine in it. They cannot realize that what they call inspiration is but the happy flowing of matter along channels dug out by labour; that but for such labour there could be no inspired poem at all; for the idea of work in connexion with inspiration would seem to them derogatory, or at all events a paradox. They thus make their poet both more and less than a man: more, because he is a priest of Apollo, oracular and semi-divine; less, because he has no control over his thoughts and words, but is a mere machine, a phonograph. But we have seen how unjust to the poet this view is, which would rob him of all credit for that mental discipline and culture necessary for those who, to win success in their art, are obliged with incessant care to 'strictly mediate the thankless Muse.'

A good deal of this unconscious arrogance towards literature results from the way in which we are first brought into contact with the Muse. It is thought that her good graces may be won in some such way as this: For a foundation learn by heart — on compulsion — a few passages that bore you from the works of Milton, Wordsworth, and Mrs. Hemans; upon this receive a structure consisting of as many titles and dates as can be retained of the writings of Anglo-Saxon poets, some lines from the *Canterbury Tales*, and a Shakespeare comedy (studied for the sake of its hard words and its allusion to old customs). If finally you top up with a rattling knowledge of some chronological list of writers' names, you are supposed, and, what is worse, sometimes suppose yourself, to be well freighted, shipped, and manned for any literary voyage.

And yet the study of the history of poetry taken up in the proper spirit and at a proper time, is both interesting for its own sake and useful as a means of tracing the development of language, the influence of the time-spirit upon man's thought and feeling, and of gaining a grasp upon relative values. But then there are three main reasons for studying the subject. We may study it as part of a general plan of culture, or from pleasure in collecting such kind of information, or to complete our appreciation of poetry. Like a biographical dictionary — that general resurrection of nonentities — a history of poetry has to call up from Limbo many a shade who would otherwise rest in well-earned oblivion. Most of these were exceedingly voluble, of considerable vogue in their day, and

interesting on other grounds than poetry; they cannot therefore be neglected by those who study for culture and the pleasure of information. But had such poets as Occleve, Lydgate, Skelton, Thomas Churchyard, Gascoigne, etc., never written a verse, the fact would make no difference to any man's appreciation of good poetry. Indeed, there is a positive danger in reading much of such poor stuff. Our ears are dulled, our minds made flaccid, by a constant succession of bad verses, so that one or two a little better than the majority take a disproportionate value by contrast, and what is but relatively tolerable may thus become absolutely good, and our judgment so far vitiated.

A feeling for language, an ear for music, a heart for passion, and a soul for beauty — that is the essential equipment of a lover of poetry. So furnished he may adventure among the great names of all nations wherever chance or fancy lead him; if he can but scan the verse and get an inkling of the meaning he is sure at least of a happy hour. And if he would supplement these natural gifts with knowledge of art and intellectual appreciation, let him read the poets of note in his own language, and study what he reads, with the object of winning from it the greatest possible enjoyment and, at the same time, gaining a criterion of real merit. He may then round off his knowledge profitably by reading a good history of poetry. But it is better to have learnt one set of verses by heart, voluntarily and for the sake of the pleasant sound of the words, than to know the names and dates of all the poems and poets the world has

produced. It is better because it is a sign of the beginning of a genuine love for poetry, which will give more pleasure to him who has it, than an exorbitant memory; better, because such love is of greater educational value, leading as it will to natural growth, than a mere distension of facts, which too often leads to mental dyspepsia; and better finally, because it secures for him that development of aesthetic feeling which is necessary to a well-balanced nature.

Love for an art brings with it a curiosity about the means and methods with which that art obtains its effects. In satisfying this curiosity with regard to poetry our ears become refined, our sensibilities more delicate; we learn something of the values of words and of style, we begin to think of the relative importance of themes; a notion of what is meant by art comes gradually to us, its problems and solutions interest us more and more, and so we rise by degrees from passive enjoyment to actively full appreciation of what we read. And the result of this is that the limited personal predilections we started with are enlarged into an objective catholicity of taste. That we should begin with one poet at the centre of our circle of appreciation is almost inevitable. Every poet has his born lovers, between whom and himself there is a natural affinity of feeling; and until that poet has been set in the place of honour we cannot really know what love of poetry means. But until his right to that place has been tested and upheld by the judgment, we are not so much lovers of poetry as of one kind of poetry, with no knowledge whether

that kind is the best. Nor until that is done can we, as a rule, bring ourselves to admit even the possibility of other poets appealing equally strongly to other readers. For if we assume Keats to be in the centre of such a circle, Shelley then will very likely be on the circumference, as by comparison cold and unsociable; Browning outside altogether, as rough, intricate, and ugly, and Byron as coarse and unmusical; while as for Pope, the scornful quotation of a couplet disposes at once of him. And yet there is no poet of any name who has not some special appeal of his own to certain readers, and it should be the aim of our culture to discover what this appeal is, and to try and respond to it ourselves, for until we have done so our aesthetic natures cannot be considered to be fully developed. We cannot indeed force ourselves to love anything for which we have no natural sympathy, but we can learn to admire what is good in poetry because it is good. And for such as need them I will here offer a few practical suggestions as to the way poetry should be read with a view of finding out whether it is really good.

To such I would say, read a poem first for the general impression, slowly for the sake of the music, colour, and feeling, carefully for the sake of the meaning; but do not stop in the middle to reflect. Having finished the first reading, ask yourself what is the central thought of the poem, what effect the poet was trying to produce. Is the theme in itself poetical; is it well treated, well proportioned? If it is a dramatic poem, do not judge it by the same standards as a lyrical poem. Next analyse the

metrical scheme. How does it suit the theme? Is it varied or monotonous in its rhythm? If the poem has no music, are there compensations in strength, grace, colour, and significance? If there is a want of beauty, has it vitality, picturesqueness, or dignity of style? Examine the imagery and try to realize the pictures. Are they harmonious, in general tone with the composition as a whole? Have they originality, vividness, beauty; or are they commonplace, confused, not carried through? Analyse the metaphors, figures, etc. Do they bring out the full value of the thought? Are they justly proportionate to the thought? Do they elevate it by the associations roused, or not? Examine the single phrases that please, their sound and meaning and position. Note the arrangement of words and verses; why is this word used rather than that? Is there not some delicate shade of meaning, some fine ripple of rhythm, some added smoothness, freshness of appeal, or visualizing force in the word that accounts for the choice? And, as a whole, weigh the copiousness of thought and imagination, the strength and refinement of feeling, the fullness of life, the power of the poet. Do not mistake simplicity of treatment for poverty, nor elaboration for wealth; spontaneity is often simple, but it is of more value than a fanciful mosaic. What are the peculiar characteristics of the poet, the side of life he shows best, the themes he is best fitted to treat? Compare, if possible, his treatment of a theme with the same theme treated by other poets, and note what is special about the style. If the poem aims at beauty, is it the still and formal

beauty of subjective idealism, or the supple, strong and simple beauty of life?

By putting to oneself some such questions as these, and taking trouble to answer them, much may be learnt and more enjoyed. But it must be borne in mind that any attempt to analyse the charm of a poem, or explain the mysterious interaction of thought and feeling and imagination that produces it, is waste of time. In vain we beat the coverts of words, passion, imagination, thought, and beauty; a stirring in the bushes, a rustle of the grass, a dim quickly vanishing shadow, that is all our reward. A feeling that something wonderful is at hand, the thrill of its presence, and — "the rest is silence." So it is always when the soul hunts outside the understanding, when feeling is asked to render up its secrets to the brain. A gust of passion sweeps through the branches of thought, rhythmically sways them, and passes. Behold, there is poetry. And as easily can trees retain and examine the wind as we the charm and mystery of the verse that moves us. How comes a feeling of infinity to be soluble in sound? What is this mysterious power in poetry that makes us echo the cry of Faustus kissed by the shade of Helen, "Her lips suck forth my soul — see, where it flies"? How can two or three words put together one way throw us into a trance of delight, and, turned ever so slightly, have no more effect on us than marbles rolled over a flagstone? We hide our ignorance of these matters under words like genius and inspiration; but to find a name for a thing does not explain it.

Feeling is dumb; could she speak, we should per-

haps know all; but she can only make gestures, and art is but her most skilful interpreter. For what are words, what music even, but gestures of the soul? He therefore who would explain the charm of art must needs find a still better interpretation of feeling than art itself can give. And this is why definitions of poetry but offer us grapeskins for the wine vatted in the cellars of life and poured forth into the cups of the poet.

And therefore there is no rule for the making of poetry, though it is subject to rules of its own making, the observance of which has been found by experience to cause more pleasure than their neglect. Its vehicle of expression being common to all who can speak, while its methods and aims are opposed to those of ordinary life, it tempts many to write who are foredoomed to failure. They feel, but they do not feel deeply and delicately enough; they imagine, but their imaginations have no life, grace, or stature; they have words but they cannot make them chime. What affects them they try to describe in detail, and the details, being neither characteristic nor beautiful, are dull. Or they confine themselves to pompous generalities and commonplaces. And so the impression they create is either wrong or nugatory. Nor have they any eye for the whole. They do not know where to begin, nor where to stop, not having any clear idea of the effect they wish to produce, nor command of the means by which it might be attained. In short, they have neither conception nor execution, only a congestion of feeling. And so they fail, and perhaps wonder to themselves what is the reason. Then it is that they turn again to the classics; and

looking on them with a clearer eye, a chastened reverence, find in them much that was before hidden. And they no longer cry out in bitterness against themselves, or curse their hours of composition as misspent, knowing that failure was the price paid for this new insight, this heightened appreciation of what is good, and acknowledging that the sum was not excessive.

And the lover of poetry, unable though he may be to write it himself, has it in his power to do not a little in its service. It is for him that the poets write; it is for him, therefore, to keep up the standard and to welcome new strains and new singers. He can influence opinion, awake interest, and spread enthusiasm, for his enjoyment being free from envy, and his judgment from partiality, he is listened to when praising others' wares. And so encouragment is given to those who badly need it, to modern poets, who, forsaking perhaps the ways of their predecessors, nevertheless give voice to the spirit of the time, serving in the cause of beauty and wisdom with no less zeal, even though maybe with less power, than those who came before them, once modern too.

The impulse to create is eternal, the products of that impulse inexhaustible. There will never be an end of poetry till there is an end of man; and poetry, however different its forms, will always be the same in essence it has ever been — man's endeavour to realize his emotion and (adapting the well known lines of Marvell)

> To roll all his strength and all
> His sweetness up into one ball.

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